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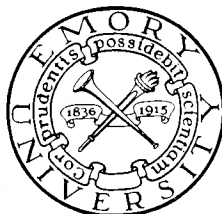
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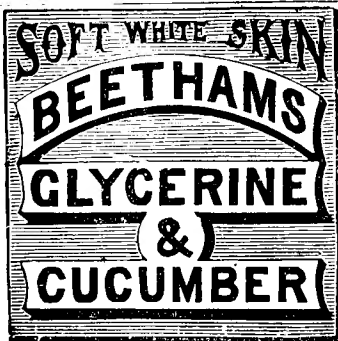
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A MENTAL STRUGGLE

BY

MRS. HUNGERFORD

AUTHOR OF 'MOLLY BAWN' 'A MODERN CIRCE' 'MARVEL'
'IN DURANCE VILE' ETC.



A NEW EDITION

London

CHATTO & WINDUS, PICCADILLY

1892

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LONDON

A MENTAL STRUGGLE.

CHAPTER I.

"Care, when it once is entered in the breast,
Will have the whole possession ere it rest."

"Debt haunts the mind!"

OUTSIDE the window can be heard the cawing of innumerable rooks in the old ivied tower; inside, the crackling of the glorious fire, as the pine logs roar madly up the wide chimney. There is a suspicion of frost in the air, no more. Autumn is still crying aloud for remembrance, though death has claimed her.

"If you wish so very much to have these people here, of course they must be asked," says Lady Olivia, gazing somewhat plaintively at her husband. The younger members of the family have just quitted the breakfast-table, so it seems to her a rather good opportunity of learning Sir Hugh's final decision on the matter, without the intervention of Imogen's rather vehement opinions. "It will be a little trying if they come," she says, "and I don't suppose they will be the nicest people in the world for the girls to know; but if you see no way out of it, there is nothing more to be said."

"Nothing. It can't be helped now, at all events," returns Sir Hugh, with a suspicion of embarrassment. As he speaks, he glances at the letter in his hand—a long letter, rich in friendly adjectives. "Schoolfellows are an institution, you know," he goes on with a little shrug, half

smiling, "and some of them have memories. *This* one has. And when he expresses a wish to come and see me, and make my wife's acquaintance, what can I do but write and say how welcome he and his will be?"

"What, indeed!" assents Lady Olivia, her soft mouth widening into an answering smile to his. "But just now it will be inconvenient, and a terrible bore into the bargain. How they are to be amused is more than I can tell you; the neighbourhood is so empty, and we ourselves——" She pauses, and her smile dies into a deep regret. "There is a son, is there not, and a daughter?" She lifts her eyes to his and sighs faintly as she says this. The sigh belongs, however, to the pause.

"A son and a daughter; yes. As to amusing them, the former will hunt, I suppose, and probably ruin one of my best hunters before the expiration of his visit; and the girl—oh 'as for the girl, I should think she will do very well," says Sir Hugh, cavalierly. "Imogen will see to that."

"Ah! yes," says the mother; but Imogen's pale, aristocratic, disdainful face rises before her as she says it, and she calculates to a nicety the amount of cold courtesy that will be accorded by her to these unwelcome guests. "What is their name?" she inquires, rather faintly. "Perhaps, after all, if the name is good, people will not ask questions; and some of those unpleasant people have been known to possess in a marvellous manner names of the most high sounding."

"Brown," returns Sir Hugh with distinct abasement.

"Brown!" Her heart dies within her. "With an e?" she asks weakly. It is her last hope, but even this is not to be gratified.

"I don't know—I suppose not—I dare say, Yes," stammers Sir Hugh, in such confusion that she feels naught left to her but despair and "*Brown!*"

There is a deep and eloquent silence for quite a minute. Then—

"How did he make his money?" she asks miserably. Even as she puts to him this inquiry, she begins to think with dismay of what the whole country-side will say of *them*—the Heriots—who had been up to this so carefully

exclusive ! It is an eminently well-bred country-side, and never yet had introduced within its sacred boundaries such a horror as a family polluted by trade. And now (as Lady Olivia whispers to herself, to her discomfiture) it seems that *she* is on the fair road to be the first one to introduce that horror within her hitherto well guarded gates. "What was it ?" she asks again.

"Cotton !" answered Sir Hugh briefly.

And then indeed his wife feels that her cup is full.

"If it had been even *wine*," she says hopelessly ; "but *cotton* ! I'm sure I don't know what the Gordons will think."

"If you did, my dear Olivia, you would be the cleverest woman on earth, which, thank goodness, you aren't. To read our neighbours' thoughts is beyond us—a most merciful arrangement by-the-bye," says Sir Hugh, with an attempt at light-hearted raillery that sits very badly on him, and only serves to bring tears to his wife's eyes. Seeing them, he drags his chair over the carpet until he is quite close to her, and laying his own hand on her white plump one, pats it softly. "Look here," he says, in his usual kindly, loving voice, "it can't be got out of in any way. I've viewed it all round, and it's not to be done. I look to you to put me through this unpleasant affair, as I've looked to you all my life."

"Well, you shan't look in vain," replies Lady Olivia, cheerfully ; she returns the pressure of his hand, and if the tears still linger in her eyes, they now mingle with a warmth and gladness that speak of loving trust, born many years ago, and destined never to die. "I shouldn't care about it," she says, earnestly, "I shouldn't *indeed*—though I feel the girl will be unbearable—if—if it wouldn't be such an additional expense."

"True," answers her husband ; and the sharp lines that care has laid upon his face become now more defined. "But as I said before, it can't be helped ; so we must only make the best of it."

But to Lady Olivia it seems difficult just now to make the best of it. All seems at its very worst. She leans back in her chair, and trifles idly with the crumbs of trust

upon her plate, and her mind wanders with a swift but sorrowful rapidity over many things that of late have come to trouble the harmony of her hitherto almost perfect life. To be entirely happy from birth to death is not allowed to any human thing.

"I think I must go now, dearest," she says softly, rousing Sir Hugh from his reverie. She unclasps her hand from his, and, rising, moves gently from the room and up to Imogen's studio to consult with her. She is sure of the girl's sympathy, Imogen being more averse to the coming of these visitors than even she can be.

About thirty years ago Sir Hugh Heriot, then a young man of twenty-three or so, just fallen into his title and the paltry four thousand a year that accompanied it, had made up his mind to join a large party who were off to the 'Land o' Cakes' for fun and grouse-shooting. There he saw fit to fly at higher game than that excellent bird. Within one week and three days after his arrival in Scotland he found himself head over ears in love with the second daughter of an impecunious Scotch earl, who had not so much as a bawbee to divide between his seven girls. But what are bawbees when love is in our midst? Heriot, like a true lover, forgot that such sordid things existed, and spent a long hour at the end of those ten momentous days persuading his Olivia to forsake her native land and return with him to his Devonshire home.

He was tall, handsome, well-favoured, and altogether about as nice a young man as one could meet. And presently it came about that Lady Olivia in bed one night, under cover of the friendly darkness, confided to her younger sister (a most delightful girl, in spite of her red hair) that Hugh Heriot was the dearest fellow in all the world—the only man she should ever care for; and that—that he had *hinted* at things, and that if he didn't mean that he really *loved* her they might dig her grave without further delay in the nearest churchyard; and, finally, that he had said to her that evening in the garden so-and-so and so-and-so, and ever so many other things besides. And did Janet really—*really* think——

She had paused there, and had left her own bed and

crossed the patches of moonlight on the floor to where Janet lay listening intently. They were occupying the same room for the night, the old rambling Scottish mansion being full of guests to overflowing. If there was no money at Tullygoram, there were at all events plenty of guests, morning, noon, and night. She crept into Lady Janet's bed and clasped her arms round her. Ah, *what* did Janet think?

Whereupon Lady Janet (who really *was* a most delightful girl, and fully deserved the man she got afterwards) declared there was not a doubt in the world but that Hugh Heriot adored her dear Olivia, and only wanted one little word from her to make him propose in due form. She—Lady Janet—had long seen how hopelessly in love the poor dear fellow was, and she now saw that soon her darling Olivia would be carried miles and miles away from her to that horrid England. This miserable ending to her prognostications only seemed to raise the spirits of the ungrateful Olivia to an abnormal height. She went to sleep immediately, and dreamed all sorts of rose-coloured dreams.

She acted on her sister's advice, however, next day, and, having given Sir Hugh the little needful word, was informed by him upon the spot that she was the "light of his eyes," and his "heart's darling," and so forth. He also informed her that should her father, Lord Tulloch, refuse his consent to their union, he should feel it not only a duty but a pleasure to put a period to his existence.

Most mercifully it so happened that nothing so awful as this contingency arose. Lord Tulloch, even after his last toddy for the night, might safely be dubbed a shrewd old nobleman, with whom a shilling always meant twelve pence, if not a little more; and he secretly considered a baronet with £4,000 a year as an article "by no means to be sneezed at." He therefore gave his consent to the enamoured lover's prayer, after a decent show of hesitation. He was *very* good about hurrying on the wedding. He squeezed Hugh's hand vinously as the carriage started with the bride and bridegroom, and breathed after them a sincere prayer for their welfare, and a still sincerer one

that Providence would soon throw just such another lover in the paths of his six remaining daughters.

Thus Sir Hugh and Lady Olivia Heriot began their married life in the quaint, rambling Elizabethan structure called The Chevies, that had been the home of Sir Hugh's forefathers for generations; a charming, picturesque old place, situated in the very heart of sunny Devon.

After a very short time (as it appeared to *her*), there came a letter to Lady Janet, telling of an heir born to the Heriots. "He is the bonniest boy in all England," wrote the young mother proudly. She was evidently delighted with him. And if the birth of a child gave her joy, certain it was that time held for her very much joy in the future. As the years went on, many more letters were despatched northwards, all containing news of either a son or daughter born to the happy parents, until at length one day Sir Hugh accidentally discovered that he was the father of four as handsome boys and three as pretty girls as the county could boast.

About the same time also he made a second discovery—not, alas! so pleasant a one as the first—to the effect that he was by no means so rich a man as he had been. £4,000 a year and a young wife is a very different thing from £4,000 a year when the young wife has brought into the world seven healthy children—and they all *were* healthy, bless them!

There was Tom, the heir before mentioned—a great, tall, good-looking fellow, with a careless, sweet temper, "as like his father at that age," said his mother, "as ever a boy could be." He was about twenty-three then (a year ago), and held a commission in a cavalry regiment—as he does now, for the matter of that. A kind, lovable, not over-brilliant young man, as great a favourite with his brother-officers as he was with everyone else who knew him.

After him came Constance, who resembled nobody in particular, and who had gone off remarkably well during her first season. She had married a Mr. Travers, a young man rather prepossessing in appearance when he had any expression in his face, which, unfortunately, was seldom. He had a considerable property, however, about twelve

miles from The Chevies, which quite balanced her affair.

It was an undeniable comfort to Lady Olivia's anxious mind that Constance should have so comfortably ranged herself before Imogen was old enough to make her bow to the world. Had Harry Travers dallied in his love-making for two years longer, Lady Olivia would not have answered for the consequences. Imogen, with her great violet eyes and pensive mouth, was so much more beautiful. There was an indescribable grace about the girl's *svlts*, lissom figure, and the slow movements of her haughty head, that would have eclipsed all the minor charms of Constance in an hour.

Yet, in spite of all her beauty, Imogen could not lay claim to half the lovers her younger sister, Patricia, could count, who is barely eighteen now, and not nearly so handsome. There is a coldness or reserve about Imogen—a reserve that touches on hauteur, that repels as it attracts. Pride of birth is stamped upon each of her calm features. The soft but steady light in her eye is replete with a gentle arrogance. People without a pedigree, no matter how rich or how well received by society in general, are but as an abomination in her sight. Beneath the pressure of circumstances she might indeed consent to acknowledge them, in the very coldest sense of that word—might even go so far as to place her hand in theirs; but to associate with them—*never!*

Yet with the poor ("who are always with us") and with her father's tenants Miss Heriot is on the very friendliest terms. All the Heriots, as a rule, are looked upon with loving eyes by the majority of the under-classes about Egworth, but to Imogen by far the largest share of affection and respect is accorded. In every cottage she is welcome, in every meanest hovel; and as she sits in her pretty cashmeres and laces upon the rickety chairs and dissipated stools, to hear how "Willyum" got over the last attack of "the rheumatiz," or how finely Polly's baby is doing, one would find a difficulty in connecting her with the haughty beauty, who knows so well how to walk with stately step and gracious self-possession through crowded "receptions,"

and past aspiring nobodies, with her small haughty head well in the air.

Time, serving rather to increase than lessen this pride (this one great fault in a sweet nature), leaves her somewhat open to comment, and teaches those who are not exactly up to the mark, according to *her* standard of what constitutes good blood, to both dislike and fear her. She is never rude (she could not be that, if she tried), but there is something in the very gentle iciness of her smile that checks the vivacity of those brought into contact with her against her will, and prevents them from ever seeking to renew their acquaintance with her.

"It was her look, my dear, *her look*," says old Mrs. Hatton, whose good man has amassed his honest million by means of starch. "It was worse than words, I tell you. She looked my Jane straight down, she did—a proud conceited minx!"

All this wretched nonsense Imogen inherited more from the mother's than the father's side. Not that dear Lady Olivia possessed a single atom of it, beyond what her position absolutely required; but still it had shown itself very aggressively in several members of the Tulloch family. There was old Lady Edgerton, Lady Olivia's aunt, who it was well known had taken to her bed for three days after a dinner-party given by Lord Pilworth, in consequence of having been sent down to dinner with a man whose great-great-grandfather had dealt in coal. He was a charming man, handsome, intellectual, and irreproachably attired; but in Lady Edgerton's eyes he was not attired at all, and was simply begrimed and covered with soot; and, by her at least, Lord Pilworth was never forgiven.

In between Imogen and the gayer Patricia there comes a youth of tender years and slender proportions, yecept Sandie. His real name is Alexander—a dignified appellation belonging to his maternal grandfather, and full of proud associations culled from a pagan past. But it had proved utterly unsuited to this possessor of it. "Alex" even they had tried, but it was of no use. There was no sense of dignity about the boy; so he sank by lower and lower degrees, until he arrived at Sandie, when it was felt

that even for *him* no deeper depths were known ; so Sandie he now is, and will probably remain to the end of many chapters.

He is nineteen, as handsome as an Apollo, without even a tinge of that unpleasant colour in his dark, clean-cut head that ought to belong to his unpleasant name. A merry, reckless lad, an acknowledged darling with all women, old and young, and, if the truth be confessed, perhaps a little--just a *little*--beyond control. Here and there are brilliant spots upon his college life that do not altogether redound to his credit. Faint rumours of his doings reach The Chevies every now and then ; and on such occasions, when it dawns upon her that her pretty Sandie is not altogether such an one as her heart desireth, his mother looks grave, and sighs a little, and posts to him long letters of tenderest admonition, that are seldom read by the graceless recipient, or else considerably skipped. But these letters are the whole of his scoldings. When the boy comes home to them for his vacations, the brightness of his smile, his open certainty that a warm welcome lies before him, puts an indefinite stop to all proceedings against him, and gives him the character of being rather a martyr than a culprit.

Patricia and he, though dissimilar in character, closely resemble each other in feature. Both are dark, whilst the rest of the family are distinctly Saxon in face and form. Patricia has dark eyes of a soft hazel, and nut-brown hair to match. She is quite as tall as Imogen, and though by no means so beautiful, is still sufficiently pretty to create a sensation in any ball-room. She is gay, sweet, *insouciant*, full of sympathy for rich and poor, and her father's darling ; but, for all that, she is not so much the "hearth-angel" as the calmer Imogen. To the latter come all the boys, as to their mother, with the numerous griefs and agonies that accompany a school-life ; Tom regards her with open admiration ; Sandie, the degenerate, believes most firmly in her wisdom ; to the younger boys she is a Minerva in petticoats ; her father and mother have few secrets from her, and even Constance (who is eminently self-sufficient and given to assert herself at times with

astonishing boldness) has been known on two or three occasions to lower her crest and come all the way to The Cheries to ask Imogen's opinion upon certain subjects.

The two other boys, Arthur and Hugh—mere youngsters—are at present undergoing the joys of school life in a distant shire.

When first Sir Hugh had made the discovery that four thousand a year—even when stretched to its utmost limit—would no further go, he had felt for a day or so uncomfortable, and then had determinedly put the knowledge behind him. But a year ago it had struggled to life again, and had persisted in a very ill-bred fashion in staring him in the face. Debts somehow had begun to accumulate of late years, and now seemed determined to declare themselves with very disagreeable openness. The family lawyer shook his head solemnly; the old and trustworthy steward dropped a word or two; and Sir Hugh, going home one day thoroughly out of temper and at heart writhed, sold a couple of his favourite hunters most disadvantageously; the remainder of the week he employed walking about his farm, doing gloomy penance, and being cross to his wife for the first time in all their married life.

But this state of things only lasted for ten days. At the end of that time, his third hunter having fallen lame, one of those disposed of was bought back at quite a fabulous price, and presently the other followed suit; after which Sir Hugh gave up the gloomy penance, to the great relief of all the household, and, having kissed his wife, neglected the farm for quite a number of days.

But of course Lady Olivia knew they were in difficulties (what a tenderly explanatory word that is!). She could hardly indeed have continued blind to it, as Sir Hugh's face was never formed to conceal a secret. And when she was quite sure, she of course told her prime minister, Imogen, and they two spent a very dispiriting morning in "mamma's" boudoir, discussing the pros and cons, and the probabilities and impossibilities, and the horror of having to sell all "papa's" hunters, until at last Imogen's brain took fire, and she saw a way out of it.

Yes; there was one thing that could be done—a thing

that would spare poor papa the mortification of being without his horses. There was that annual visit to town, for example, which had grown to be part of their lives. "Well, let us give it up—for *this* year at all events."

The suggestion, though perhaps a relief, was a severe blow to the mother. It was during her first season that Constance had managed her *affaire* so admirably, falling into lines of the very smoothest at the Hall, and with a baronetcy in prospective—Constance, who was neither so *chic* nor so beautiful as Imogen. It would be a chance thrown away, this staying at home, and no one could say what would have been missed. Imogen, in her first season, had refused three eligible offers, before which the golden charms of Harry Travers paled into insignificance. A second season given, and who could say to what heights the beautiful child might not aspire? And now, by Imogen's own desire, this second season was to be abandoned. It seemed quite dreadful to poor Lady Olivia that this golden opportunity must be flung aside.

"My dearest," she said, laying her hand on Imogen's slender fingers, "I hardly think I should be doing my duty if I were to seek to retrench in *that* way. Consider what an injustice I should be doing, you now, and Patricia later on."

"Never mind the injustice to us; the justice to *others* is the thing to consider," said Imogen. Then, with a little fond smile that softened the severity of her words, "*I* shall not mind, nor will Patricia, I know. As for her, she has a year to wait according to your arrangements; and perhaps next year—who knows?—something may happen."

"Oh! the skies may fall, of course," returned Lady Olivia, just a little impatiently, though her eyes were full of tears. "That is too Micawberish a sentiment for me to applaud. It is *terrible* to me that you should be kept immured in this desolate place year after year."

"Not year after year. I am giving us only twelve months' seclusion. Even that will be the saving of some time, and then Patricia might be presented. As for me, it hardly matters. I don't believe I shall ever like anyone well enough to marry him. But Patricia is different."

"Altogether different," said Lady Olivia, a little vehemently. "And I am not thinking of Patricia now; I am thinking of you. As for your never marrying, that is out of the question. I do not believe it. It is only that you have not seen *him* yet. An opportunity should be afforded you. See how well Constance did in her first season."

"Excellently well; yet I would not have married Harry for all the world," declared Imogen decidedly, if gently. "He is kind and desirable in many ways, I know; but there are so *many* Harrys in the world. Besides, if I am to be married, why I am; and I daresay *he* will condescend to come even so far as this for me. Indeed, dearest, it will be wiser to stay at home for this one year at least."

Lady Olivia gave in finally to this steady pleading, and the family stayed at home all May and June, instead of spreading its wings towards smoky town, as was its wont. Sir Hugh fretted and fumed over the decision a good deal at first, and even tried to insist upon their going, offering to sell all manner of impracticable things to enable them to do so; but Imogen was firm, and after a while the question was dropped. Sir Hugh, however, happening to go up to town for a day or two towards the close of the season, brought back to Imogen a very handsome bracelet, which she understood to represent a reward for valour, and prized accordingly.

To follow up their lately begun economy the Heriots determined upon spending a quiet autumn and winter at home, to be enlivened only by a hunting lunch or two. With Spartan heroism they had even made up their minds to leave empty all the guest-chambers (that up to this had never known a moment in which they might grow damp), when there descended upon them like a bombshell that unwelcome letter from old Brown. It was a letter not to be cast aside or treated lightly. It was full of kindly memories and friendly reminiscences. Sir Hugh grew warmer at heart as he read it, and finally it was decided that old Brown and his family should be affectionately invited to The Chevies.

This letter, innocent as it was, put a full stop to all their virtuous desires and designs for retrenchment, and was

looked upon by Imogen and her mother as a death-blow to all their hopes. For one thing, it ensured them an expensive winter, when economy was so much to be desired, and—what was far worse—upon a severe cross-examination of Sir Hugh, it was discovered that this friend of his youth was distinctly disreputable in his antecedents, having been indeed—*in trade!* Trade! A cotton-merchant! It was horrible! Cotton could not possibly mean anything but low birth and sordid surroundings and general vulgarity.

“But who was Mr.—Mr. Brown’s father, my dear Hugh?” Lady Olivia had asked when first the coming of these dreadful people had been broached. And Sir Hugh, being pressed, was obliged to confess that the position of his early friend’s father was utterly unknown to him. A closer investigation, indeed, led to the belief that probably old Brown never had a father.

“We were great chums at school and college,” said Sir Hugh reflectively, “and once I brought Brown home with me for a vacation. Somebody must have paid for his schooling; but I really, now you mention it, don’t recollect ever hearing anything about a father. But of course he must have had one—eh?”

Whereupon Lady Olivia groaned in spirit, and thought dismally of what the Blounts and the De Veres and the Vernons would say.

She had had some little hope, perhaps, that something, after all, might prevent the necessity of her having to ask them, but to-day’s letter has put all such hopes to flight. Entering Imogen’s pretty room, Lady Olivia seats herself upon the nearest ottoman and gives herself up a prey to melancholy.

CHAPTER II.

"Sure, care's an enemy to life."

"I am slain by a fair, cruel maid."

"It is all over," she says dejectedly. "It appears these people must be asked."

"I never heard of anything so unreasonable," declares Miss Heriot, laying down her pencil and sinking into a chair opposite to her mother with quite a stricken air. "It is perfectly indecent, their asking themselves here. Papa should not encourage them. He is very weak on some points."

"Not so weak as tender-hearted," corrects Lady Olivia loyally. "And, of course, I can see how there would be a difficulty in refusing to receive an—an old friend."

"Friend! What friendship could there be between papa and a cotton-spinner? The idea is absurd. Because one happens to have been at a public school with someone, is that a reason why the someone shall hang himself round one's neck all one's days? Time should have shown this man the difference between him and a Heriot. But one never knows what to expect from people of that class. By-the-bye, how many of them are there?"

"Four—father and mother, one son and a daughter."

"Ah! so few!" says Imogen, with mild sarcasm.

"Few? Do you think four few?" asks Lady Olivia, opening her eyes. Never in her life, dear soul, did she understand anything that wasn't put before her in the very plainest print.

"Well, there might certainly have been more of them," returns Imogen demurely. "There might have been three

daughters and three sons; and, if so, I suppose they would all have come. Let us be thankful for small mercies."

"Now they *are* coming, we must only try to make them happy," says Lady Olivia with another sigh. "But I do wish it had been wine instead of cotton. There is something so very impossible about cotton."

"There will be something equally impossible about the the Browns, you will find," remarks Miss Heriot mildly.

"Still, darling, we *must* be civil to them, if only to please your father. You will do your best for them, Imogen, will you not?"

"A sorry best it will prove, I fear. I suppose I could not go to Aunt Agnes for a month or so?"

"Oh, Imogen!" cries her mother, tears rising to her eyes at the bare idea of being thus deserted in her need.

"Nonsense! Of course I shan't leave you!" exclaims the girl, smiling a little and leaving her own chair to seat herself beside her mother and take one of her hands caressingly in hers. "Do you think I would leave you defenceless in the hands of these barbarians? Why, I might find you semi-devoured by the time I returned. No, it is papa I should like to forsake, if only to punish him for having brought all this down upon our heads; but, you see, I can't make vengeance mine in this instance." She tilts back her head and frowns slightly as though at some angry passing thought. Then, "Have you told Patricia?"

"No; I came first to you. What rooms shall we give them: the blue rooms, or those in the western wing?"

"The blue rooms. They are the farthest off," decides Miss Heriot promptly.

"Very good; I shall tell Holland. Do you know they will, in all probability, be here on Friday? Mr. Brown mentioned that day, in his letter to your father, as one that would suit him, if it chanced to be convenient to us. I shall have to write and say 'Yes' to that, of course."

"Poor mother!"

"I wonder what they will be like, and how long they will stay. I don't suppose they would understand me if I put the usual limit to their visit."

"Oh, as to what they will be like," says Imogen, crossing

to the hearthrug, and placing one little dainty foot upon the high brass fender, "I can tell you all about *that*. The old man will be the *facsimile* of a Yorkshire farmer—only worse, because he will have a strong dash of Manchester mixed up with his turnips; and he will be always using horribly obsolete words, and he will be very attentive to *you*, and will probably call you 'Ma'am,' or even perhaps 'Mum.' Bear this well in mind, lest at any time you should be tempted to forget he is your guest and not your butler."

"My dear girl, it can't be so altogether bad!" exclaims poor Lady Olivia, aghast.

"Mrs. Brown," goes on Imogen, ignoring the interruption, "will be large and red and fat, like cook, and will wear white gloves at dinner, many sizes too large for her. Miss Brown will be a mincing, silly school-girl, ready to die with laughter at everything Patricia may choose to say; and the son—will be a boor, *par et simple*."

"What *will* the county say?" ejaculates Lady Olivia, looking really miserable, as she takes to heart her daughter's graphic, if strictly imaginary, description of the coming guests.

"All it can of the most unpleasant. Be prepared for that. But you *needn't* be prepared for quite such people as I have described. They will be bad, no doubt; but I dare say not so unendurable as I have led you to believe. And, after all, it can't last for ever."

"True. And yet four weeks can contain much misery," sighs Lady Olivia wearily.

But the die being cast, and these objectionable people waiting for an invitation, she subdues herself, and writes them quite a cordial note, full of a warm desire to make their acquaintance, that when finished smites her with remorse as being distinctly hypocritical. Even as she closes it she hesitates, and there is quite a lengthened skirmish with conscience as she decorates it with a penny stamp. But it goes to the post for all that; and when the next Friday arrives, it brings with it the unwelcome Browns.

It is a somewhat late train that brings them, so that

when they reach The Chevies there is just barely time left them to get into their evening clothes.

Lady Olivia receives them with that placid smile that serves for most occasions, and with a few ordinary expressions that mean little or nothing. Sir Hugh greets them warmly, some old, undefined, half-forgotten sensations springing to life within his breast as he grasps between both his own the hard, brown hand of his *ci-devant* school-friend. Perhaps he experiences some faint shock as he gazes upon the face of the man who had once been the light-haired boy—the gay stripling—the slender young man—so well known to him both at Eton and Oxford.

Oddly enough, Mr. Brown, senior, very strangely resembles the fanciful portrait drawn of him by Miss Heriot. Stout, with an abundant crop of rather upright hair, and with a broad, good-humoured face, the successful millionnaire gives one the full impression that he belongs of right to the smaller class of farming gentry. This, with his general air of being “up in the morning, oh, so early!” and having the scent of heather and corduroy about him, arises from the fact that of late years (indeed, ever since his retirement from trade) he has taken lovingly to the culture of mangolds and the breeding of shorthorns and Border Leicesters.

But, however correct she had been in her reading of Brown *père*, Miss Heriot had been ignominiously in the wrong with regard to the others. Mrs. Brown, far from being fat, red, and cookish, is remarkably slight and fragile, and very charming both in manner and appearance.

Miss Brown, whose Christian name is Elinor, is a smaller edition of her mother, when one has got reconciled to the fact that she is without the gentle expression and the delicate air of self-possession that sits so pleasantly upon the latter. She is pretty, and elegant in appearance, however, with good eyes of a pale grey, and refined features, and would, in all probability, pass in a crowd without over-much pushing.

But it was in her description of Felix Brown that Miss Heriot had been most at fault. Anyone more unlike a boor could hardly be imagined. Tall, fair, distinguished-

looking, he might take his place with honour in any society in Christendom. Some faint resemblance can be traced to his gentle mother in the darkness of his grey blue eyes. His hair would be curly, and a rich, soft, sunny brown, if his barber would allow one to see it; and his heavy golden moustache covers, rather than conceals, the almost feminine sweetness of his mouth.

Perhaps, on the whole, his face would be rather too beautiful for a man, had not a certain touch of firmness, that marks the squareness of the lower jaw, suggested an amount of will lurking beneath his calm exterior that entirely does away with the idea that weakness can form any part of his character. In his smile there is a special charm: it lights up with a strange suddenness each perfect feature, and rests lingeringly, even after the cause of it has died away, in his large and kindly eyes.

"So they have come?" says Miss Heriot, turning to Patricia as the latter enters her room dressed for dinner. "Sit down a moment."

She dismisses her maid with a little gesture, and then looks again at Patricia.

"Yes, the blow has descended," says Patricia with a little laugh. "A heavy one, too, as the men look preternaturally big. My knowledge has been gained from a surreptitious glance at them from behind my bedroom-blind, so that I can't describe them very accurately. You will be late, Imogen, if you linger so long over trifles. One bracelet is quite as good as another—sometimes."

"None will be better still," returns Imogen, pushing the gold bangles from her. "I dare say the women of their party will be a little blaze of diamonds. There, go! I shall follow you directly."

Patricia is introduced. Is a little astonished, a little relieved, and finally is so far won over to the side of the enemy as to find herself in the middle of a very animated discussion with old Mr. Brown.

It is one minute past eight o'clock, and Sir Hugh grows fidgety.

"Why, where is Imogen?" he asks, a little impatiently, turning to his younger daughter. "She is

always punctual. Eh? eh? What has happened to her to-night?

"She is coming—coming! 'Great people move slowly,'" quotes Patricia lightly, with a smile and a dainty shrug of her shoulders. "Ah, speak of an angel!"

She pauses expressively, and Felix Brown looks up quickly, from his seat next Lady Olivia, as the door slowly opens. A slender figure, gowned all in simplest white, comes serenely up the room, calm, unsmiling, to where Mrs. Brown is sitting—a young girl, with a haughty head and the carriage of a queen, with a cold pure mouth and two great violet eyes full of slumbering passion. There is something in the very fold of her hand, as it droops motionless at her side, half clenched, that speaks to the young man so intently watching her. *Who is she? What?* Did Nature ever create another face such as hers—so proud, so intolerant, so *sweet*? He is hardly conscious of the intensity of his gaze until a mere accident betrays it to him. The girl, lifting her eyes with a slow resentful grace, **fixes them full on his.**

CHAPTER III.

"One thing pride has, which no other vice that I know of has; it is an enemy to itself."

"Love's likeness there endures upon all these;
But out of these one shall not gather love."

"THIS is my eldest daughter unmarried," says Sir Hugh with evident pride, taking Imogen's hand and presenting her to his old friend, who has been gazing at her with honest open admiration ever since her entrance.

"Ay, indeed!" says old Brown with open interest. He beams upon Imogen, and advancing towards her, takes both her unwilling hands in a warm clasp. "Your eldest?" he questions thoughtfully. "Well, she is the bonniest lass I have seen for many a day."

He makes this unstudied remark out loud, for the benefit of everyone in the room. It amuses Patricia so much that she forgets her manners, and laughs out loud, sweetly and cheerily, to her mother's intense horror and old Brown's intense delight. He turns instantly to her.

"You like to hear your sister admired?" he says.

"Always, when the admiration is as sincere as yours! Because I, too, think her the 'bonniest lass' in all the world!"

"Right! right!" says the old fellow approvingly.

Imogen has drawn her hands from his, *very* slowly, but with decision, and has turned away. Still his eyes follow her with a certain keenness in their expression, that, in spite of all his *bonhomie* and apparent simplicity, one finds it hard to understand. Then once again he gives his undivided attention to the younger girl, as though forgetful of the other's existence.

As for Miss Heriot, when Mr. Brown had called her a

"bonny lass," she had simply flushed a little, and directed a speaking glance towards her mother. It said as plainly as possible, "*There*, did I not tell you so?" She now moves on to be introduced to the rest of the unwelcome family. Even for one moment she cannot bring herself to forget how intrusive is their visit, and how inconvenient just now. She is only two or three years Patricia's senior, but in thought and feeling she might almost be her mother. When she remembers Sandie's incessant demands for money, and the difficulty with which Tom's allowance is produced every quarter, and all the long wearying struggle to battle with growing debt and keep up the old respectable standing in the county, she almost hates these intruders for the expenses their coming must entail.

What numerous dinners and evenings will have to be given! What incessant worry will be the result later on! Probably her father will think it necessary to give a ball—and all for *what*? A set of objectionable people, who are probably as illiterate as they are ill-bred, and who—abominable thought!—have made their oppressive riches by cotton!

How could Patricia laugh so at that dreadful old man's vulgarity? Miss Heriot, throwing up her head a little, goes through her inclinations to the others with a mixture of grace and hauteur that sits excellently upon her, rendering her more than usually lovely, and causing Felix Brown to lose his place in the languid conversation he is holding with Sandie.

She does not so much as deign to raise her eyes when bowing to Felix, so that he finds himself at full liberty to make free use of his own. He marks the deliberate gravity of her air, the coldness of the mouth that should be only sweet. Her lids hide her eyes, as I have said, but he has seen them once—in that first strange, silent glance—and it is not likely he shall ever forget. The pure oval of her face is before him, the fairness of her soft brown hair, the inexpressible beauty of her complexion. She is pale, almost remarkably so, but a reason for this pallor it would be impossible to find in that "mystic" ivory face of hers. That she is an exquisite thing both in form and feature, and that

she treats them all with only a half-disguised disdain, Felix Brown acknowledges.

He takes her in to dinner presently; but not until soup is half forgotten does she think it worth her while to look at him and ascertain more clearly what manner of man he may be. That he should be handsome is nothing; but that he should look so decidedly, so irreproachably bred is almost annoying. Her one swift glance convinces her that he is just such an one in appearance as she has been accustomed to go down to dinner with in the very best houses. "Education is evidently running birth hard, nowadays! When he opens his lips, however, some natural taint will be discernible, and breeding will proclaim itself."

He is gazing now intently across the table to where Patricia is sitting talking with a light and pretty *abandon*, as is her wont and seems openly amused with the girl's gaiety. Is he going to fall in love with Patricia? It would be quite the correct thing for an aspiring cotton-man to do—to lose his heart ambitiously to the daughter of a family as old as his is young.

As she comes to this point, Felix turns to her with a little puzzled air.

"Your sister reminds me of someone," he says, "but I can't think who it is."

"Some one *you* know? Oh, I think not," returns she steadily. Then, as a corrective to her disguised rudeness, "My sister, I have always thought, has a very uncommon face."

"Yes," says Felix reflectively; then calmly, "not so uncommon as yours, however."

Miss Heriot—who has apparently been deaf to this remark, judging by the extreme immobility of her countenance—smiles gently across the table at her brother, and then again, with a little start, addresses herself to Felix, as though he were an after-thought or anything else equally unimportant.

"You were saying——" she hazards vaguely.

"Was I? I don't know, I'm sure," returns he, with an appreciative smile. "If I *was*, I'm afraid I have forgotten. By-the-bye, you were not in town this season?"

"No."

She reddens perceptibly as she says this, and a feeling of intense wrath takes possession of her. In a second she has come to the hurried conclusion that he has heard something of their straitened circumstances, and has asked the question with a view to revenging himself upon her for her slight of a moment since. The suspicion is utterly unjust; but in her quick anger she refuses to let judgment have a voice. With a sense of passionate resentment full on her, she determines to meet and baffle this cruel revenge.

"My father was unable to afford it this year," she says, her tone measured and unconcerned.

"Yes?" returns Felix pleasantly, as though to be hard up is quite the correct thing; "you missed very little, I should say. It was the slowest thing imaginable. A meagre Park, a second-class Academy, and Operas distinctly poor. There was some very good amateur singing, but the professional music was hardly up to the mark. You like music, of course?"

"Good music, when I hear it," says Miss Heriot superciliously, "which is very seldom. I would rather be deaf for ever to all sweet sounds than be compelled to listen to the usual run of private singers—so called."

"One does hear an excellent voice, now and then, in private, however; there were several in town this year."

"Lady Constance Warburton seems to have received quite an ovation. I have heard her sing."

"So have I, and I admire her voice immensely, though I should hardly rave about it to the extent that some men do. What do you think of it?"

"I should listen quite as leniently to a street organ, perhaps. There is as much expression in one as in the other."

Felix laughs.

"Poor Lady Constance!" says he, lifting his brows. "Well, I am not a judge, I confess; but I think I should *not* give it in favour of the street organ. Her brother has managed about that appointment. I suppose you have heard!"

"Has he! No, I had not heard. I am glad of that, if

only for his friends' sake. What a relief it must be to them to get him safely out of the country!"

"Is not that a little severe?" He pushes away a glass or two, and turns rather more in her direction. "Poor James never acquired that happy knack of getting on with people—that graciousness of manner that endears one to the great and small alike—with which some are so happily gifted. *You* will understand me," he says suddenly, divining as if by a marvel the fact that Imogen in her sweeter pauses can render herself intensely lovable. He seems pleased with this inspired knowledge, and smiles at her; but Imogen, deliberately lowering her eyes, gives him no answering smile, and indeed no answer at all.


For the first time a sense of ungovernable resentment rises in the young man's breast and swamps him. He remains determinately silent. Miss Heriot, with a sensitive certainty that she has offended him, yet without contrition for the offence, still feels it her duty to set the conversational ball once again rolling.

"You were animadverting upon Lord James Dingwall—is it not?" she asks a little incorrectly.

"Or *you* were. It hardly matters—I accept the blame," answers Felix coldly and indifferently. "You—or *was* it I?—said something, or hinted it, about the crude disagreeability of his ordinary behaviour. But I put that down more to the wretchedness of his early training than to his natural disposition—which I believe to be good, though warped and injured by the embarrassments of his position when a boy. He may jar upon you in many ways, but to me James appears in the light of a rather fine character."

"It is wonderfully charitable of you," murmurs Imogen, with a slow graceful shrug of her shoulders.

Somebody on her left hand addressing her at this moment, she breaks off the discussion with Felix, but, having answered the somebody, falls a-thinking. By what right does this son of a common tradesman call Lord James Dingwall by his Christian name? How absurd! How presumptuous! Yet in keeping, too. She has always understood that "this sort of person" is, as a rule, given to boasting outrageously of its vaguest intimacy



with Lord Tom, or Lord Harry, as the case may be. *Here* it is Lord James! Miss Heriot's "understandings" on the subject have been numerous and profound.

Perhaps it is a disdainful longing to hear more of the "outrageous boasting" that compels her to again address Felix—or else a sense of duty.

"I thought Lord James a very unpleasant man," she says idly.

"Most women do. But I do not always consider them the best judges," his tone is still cold. "They form their ideas generally from the *outward* man, which naturally prevents fairness. Unless the one on trial be a lover, or a relative, they seldom do him the justice to look within. You think Dingwall 'unpleasant'—was that the word?—because he has red hair and rough manners; yet I have known him do acts of kindness to the poorest—the most forsaken—acts from which many men would have recoiled—that should render him positively beautiful in the eyes of all. Yet I dare say you will hardly allow him a gracious word because he is boorish in speech and feature, and has, indeed, nothing to recommend him but his secret, innate gentleness of soul."

"It may be so, indeed!" says Imogen wilfully.

Something in his persistence annoys her. Is he bent on compelling her to show herself in her worst colours?

"But would you, then, refuse civility to a man whom you knew to be beyond expression estimable—though, perhaps, a rough diamond—just because his manners chanced to be unprepossessing?" asks he, feeling somewhat eager in his argument. "Surely you would not? Any woman—*most* women—would, I fancy, condone his physical faults for the sake of his many virtues. Once thoroughly known, one could not fail to appreciate the man of whom we speak."

"I might appreciate him—at a distance," says Miss Heriot, in a faintly bored tone, "if I thoroughly knew him, which I gratefully acknowledge that I don't. But I should think him an impossible person all the same, whether he were a black sheep or a white; and I *certainly* should not be civil to him!"

"Ah!" says Felix Brown thoughtfully. He stares curiously at her beautiful, now slightly *gêné* face, and strokes his moustache with an abstracted air.

Is she really as soulless as she declares herself to be? Would it be impossible to those cold but lovely eyes to soften into tenderness? Could tears dim their brightness?

He forgets how earnestly he is gazing until Miss Heriot stirs involuntarily, and lifting her glance to his, encounters his steady stare, and blushes warmly, angrily. Then he recollects himself, and the admiration his look must have conveyed, and colours almost as vividly as she does.

"I beg your pardon," he says quietly; "I am strangely forgetful at times, and just then I had lost myself in a speculation as to whether you did, or did not, mean all that you had said."

"Do not lose yourself again," advises she, with a cold disdainful smile, still persistently resenting the expression of his eyes; "understand at once that I did entirely mean all that I said. I have no sympathy with such people as you have described. I detest very honestly all ill-bred people and *parvenus*—and—want of birth generally!"

A dead silence follows this speech. Then:

"We were speaking of Lord James Dingwall, if you recollect, and *he* is neither ill-bred nor a *parvenu*," says Felix Brown, looking at her steadily with a very pale face; "your words do not apply to *him*!"

"True. My thoughts must have wandered farther afield," returns she slowly; but the disdain has died from her face, and a curious stillness has taken its place. Her breath is coming quickly, and her hands are trembling as they lie concealed upon her white gown, clasped in a convulsive closeness.

Then Lady Olivia makes the usual mysterious sign, and they all rise from the table. Miss Heriot rises too, still cruelly conscious of the fact that she has been guilty of a *bêtise*, and has in effect been unpardonably rude, for perhaps the first time in her life. She *might*, had time been allowed have sought to retract her words; would have glossed over her fault, and turned it almost into a compliment, as most women possess the art of doing; but it is

now too late, as everybody has risen, and there is a slight confusion.

Felix, too, is evidently desirous of escaping further words with her, as he deliberately moves away from her to the door, and holding it open, declines to meet her glance as she passes through. Casting a swift glance at him, she can see that he is not in the least disconcerted by her rudeness, but is tranquil, and occupied with a smile cast at him by the genial Patricia.

Possessed still, however, with a sense of guilt, and feeling disinclined for conversation, she crosses the drawing-room, and, sinking into a low chair near one of the windows, gazes out into the deepening night. The shutters have not been closed, and the full rays of heaven's queen strike coldly on her heart. The eternal dome is so thickly studded with its jewels, that all the surface of the lake below is tinged with gold, reflected.

"Countless stars, like clustering gems, hang sparkling in the sky,"

and the light wind, that passes to and fro, so delicately shakes the scented myrtles, that almost it seems to Inogen as if a breath from the dead summer has returned to her.

Patricia, parting the curtains of the window, steps in and seats herself upon the low-cushioned, old-fashioned seat of it next her sister.

"Too late in the year for star-gazing," she says gaily; "you should have got all that over whilst dainty June was with us. What a very cavern of darkness lies out there!" peering into the gloom of the garden. "It gives one the shivers. Did you open the shutters, or did Meadows forget to close them?"

"Meadows forgot."

"A month's warning and no character! His negligence has given you an attack of the blues. Well, how do you like them? The soft-goods people, I mean. Not half bad, eh? I watched your man at dinner; and what I could see of him I liked very much."

"Common gratitude should carry you as far as that. He evidently liked *you* very much. He followed your

every gesture as though he had never before seen a pretty girl, or heard a soft, natural laugh."

"He is handsome," says Patricia serenely. "He is like that Greek—what d'ye call it?—we saw in Florence. His features could hardly be improved upon. I saw *that*, at all events."

"He is good-looking."

"Oh, far, *far* more than that! Don't be so grudging with your praise. And he is as rich as Cræsus, Sandie tells me."

"A good thing for the young woman who gets him," says Miss Heriot, faintly smiling, and speaking as she might of the upper-housemaid's lover, did she chance to have one.

"I have come to a conclusion," exclaims Patricia suddenly, after a swift glance at her sister's contemptuous face, "and that is to make the best of Felix Brown whilst he is in our house. I shan't even content myself with being polite to him: I shall be distinctly *friendly*. So take warning, all ye who hear."

"Don't overdo it," suggests Miss Heriot carelessly.

"Do you know," says the younger girl, drawing a little closer to her, and taking her hand affectionately in her own, "that once or twice during dinner it struck me that *you* were rather *underdoing* it? You looked so pale, so altogether bored, that ——"

"What it is to have an ingenuous countenance! I looked—may I whisper it to you?—precisely as I *felt*."

"A pity!" says Patricia. "After all, a light nature such as mine has its compensations. Beauty in any form touches me, and the actual present is *all* things while it lasts. A man with eyes like his could never bore me. And, besides, there is always something superlatively interesting about a millionaire."

"Not when the millionaire owns to cotton."

"Why not? Can there be a cleaner thing? And money is money, however obtained. I am a thoroughly unbiassed person, I thank my stars, and a warm admirer of honest industry."

"You should marry your Apollo," says Miss Heriot,

with a low laugh; "and then you will be able to admire the fruits of it to your dying day."

"Ah! what golden visions you open up to me!" cries Patricia, with a little quaint dramatic gesture. "How shall I thank you for your suggestion! If this estimable young man will only condescend to ask me, I shall go with him to Manchester or Birmingham, or wherever his shoddy palace doth exist, and help him to squander his cotton."

"Patricia!" exclaims Miss Heriot.

But Patricia only laughs, and patting her hand as an adieu, rises to her feet, and pushing back the curtains, crosses the room to where Elinor Brown is sitting.

CHAPTER IV

"A heat full of coldness, a sweet full of bitterness, a pain full of pleasantness, which maketh thoughts have eyes, and hearts, and ears This is love!"

IMOGEN, following her example, emerges into the fuller glare of the lamps, and finding a *fauteuil* a little apart from the others, takes possession of it. The men have not yet tired of each other, and there is only a soft drowsy hum of voices in the long room.

Patricia, sitting directly opposite, is evidently lost in a somewhat exhausting argument with Miss Brown. The latter, looking inane and passive, and oppressively tintless, is giving way to harmless but annoying monosyllables; whilst Patricia, leaning forward upon the arm of her chair, is so bright, so animated, that the contrast between her and her companion is almost too marked to be agreeable.

"I am sure I don't know," lisps Miss Brown, being pressed a little harder by her pretty antagonist.

"Ah no! that is not what you mean," cries Patricia with decision. "One always knows! One *must* have an opinion, be it right or wrong. And I want yours to be right on this point, or I fear you will find your visit here a little dull. Now, I shall make you see it in a moment. Suppose——"

So-and-so, and so-and-so. Patricia quite glows beneath the force of her own argument, and is undismayed even when Miss Brown, in her small, ladylike, obstinate way, refuses to see the matter in her light. Patricia's charming face is all alight, and she strikes her sister—who is intently watching her—as being even more than ordinarily attractive to-night.

That the younger Mr. Brown should be insensible to this attraction is not for a moment to be hoped. That Patricia should *wish* him to be attracted is the fear that is haunting Miss Heriot. If she should ever be brought to regard him with a special favour, that would be as an abomination in the eyes of her sister. And somehow that last thoughtless speech of Patricia's had startled her. It had been made in jest, no doubt; but it seems to Miss Heriot as though a jest on such a subject is very like a placid encouragement of it.

If Patricia were to lose her heart, and insist on marrying this man called Brown, what a horrible thing it would be! What an irredeemable *mésalliance*!—Patricia! who is bound to make a good marriage with her face and general charms. An elder son of irreproachable family—should a title fail, which is unlikely—would be the thing. But as for the cotton-man——

The cotton-man entering at this moment with the others puts to flight all Miss Heriot's withering reflections.

Patricia, who in a manner seems to have adopted the older Brown, now carries him off triumphantly to be beaten at chess—a game at which she is a proficient.

"Ah! I pity you, Brown," cries Sir Hugh, laughing, as they go by. "You have an antagonist of whom I bid you beware. Every night she brings me to grief; yet I was not accounted such a bad player in my time. But she lays traps—she has secret moves. Yes; she will hold you up to public shame!"

Sandie, as in duty bound (Tom is with his regiment) falls into line near Miss Brown, and devotes to her all the light and airy converse of which he is complete master. He is young, and good to look at, and to-night rather surpasses himself in the brilliancy of his nothings. He is on his very best behaviour, though not entirely happy, or as suited as he would be. "Conversing with pale nonentities is trying!" he confesses to Imogen next morning. But just now he gets through his work with a gallantry that should have won him the Victoria Cross—a gallantry so admirable, that once it wins a blush from the passive Elinor—a weakness hitherto unknown in the annals of that emotionless damsel.

Felix Brown, seeing nothing else left to him, drops lazily into a lounging-chair close to Imogen.

"Don't send me away," he says, with a little curious half-laughing glance that puzzles her. "I'll be very good."

"Is it necessary to promise?" asks she, lifting her eyes. There is a tempered graciousness in her manner. Woman-like, she feels she owes him something for her late unkindness. "Are you so afraid of transgressing?" A smile, pale and fleeting as a moonbeam, illumines her face for a moment only.

"More than I can tell you."

There is a touch of unconscious meaning in his voice. He stoops forward and caresses, with a light touch, a small dusky terrier that has crept into Miss Heriot's lap, sure of its welcome. The little creature, after sniffing suspiciously at his hand, turns and licks it in friendly fashion. But Felix seems hardly aware of the dog's attention. Still with his hand upon the terrier's shaggy coat, he looks up at Miss Heriot.

"I have every reason for fear; I have already offended. Is not that so?" he asks in a low tone.

Miss Heriot's eyes meet his steadily.

"You forget I am not in your confidence," she returns calmly, indifferently. "I am sorry if you have so soon come to grief. Into whose bad graces have you fallen?"

"If *you* do not know," exclaims Felix gaily, "there is still balm in Gilead; and all my fears may now be called my fancies."

"Did you mean *me*—my bad graces?" asks she, with a sudden displeased surprise. She draws back from him, and the faintest tinge of pink creeps up and dyes the pallor of her cheeks.

"If I did?" questions the young man, leaning forward and regarding her intently.

"If you did, you gave yourself very unnecessary concern. To feel offence, one must feel interest; and we—are strangers!"

"True," returns Felix quietly. He gives the little dog a final pat, and then leans back in his chair. "You remind me of an undoubted fact," he continues slowly.

The room seems to have grown singularly silent. Is everyone talking in whispers? Across the embarrassing quiet comes Patricia's voice, with a clear and mellow sound. "Check!" cries she, with a little gay soft laugh of richest triumph, bringing her palms together in her delight. Her mirth is echoed by her antagonist, who appears disgracefully callous to the dire and swift destruction that is hanging over his head. There is something inexpressibly bright and refreshing about Patricia as one sees her at this moment.

"What a charming face your sister has!" says Felix, who has been apparently studying the "charming face" since last Miss Heriot spoke. "How full of life—how sympathetic!"

"Yes," coldly, "you are right; she is sympathetic. That is what constitutes her chief charm. She is amiable to all alike, always, both in season and out of it."

"A character to be envied," declares Felix. "Most of us know certain people to whom, with the best intentions possible, we find it impossible to be civil at times. Your sister is to be congratulated."

"I do not think she would care to be congratulated on her virtues," returns she languidly, letting her heavily fringed lids fall over her eyes.

Silence follows this chilling speech, and then:

"You have a headache, I am afraid," says Felix Brown quietly, yet with a determination that startles her. She glances at him as if desirous of reading his thoughts. "I so much regret I did not sooner discover it. To have to converse when one is not in the humour for it, is a terrible thing. I can hardly dare to hope you will forgive me for boring you as I have done."

He makes a movement as if to rise. Something in his tone appeals to Imogen's sense of justice. She has been hard upon him, cold, almost repellent, because of his birth, which, after all, has been no fault of his. Probably he is *au fond* a very estimable young man. Well, she will make up for her coldness now; she will be gracious to him, as she well knows how to be, and will charm him into forgetting her late incivility.

She lets a slow sweet smile grow upon her lips and curve them into perfect beauty, and lifts her great lustrous eyes languidly to his.

"You do not bore me; pray believe that," she says, in a tone that, if still only frigidly friendly, is yet far different from anything she has used towards him since the beginning of their short acquaintance. Assured of victory, she makes a little gesture with her hand that invites him to reseal himself beside her.

Felix looks at the beautiful hand, and a peculiar smile crosses his face.

"How good that is of you!" he says at last, as though overcome with gratitude. "*Too good!* I shall reward you for it, and for *all* your courtesy to me, without delay."

He smiles again, and, bowing slightly, turns away and bends his steps to where Lady Olivia is sitting near the fire.

Miss Heriot's teeth close upon her under-lip, and her eyes emit a faint flash. It is the first time in all her experience that a seat near her has been willingly abandoned. After a moment, when she has had time to quite recognise her defeat, an overpowering sense of amusement takes possession of her, mingled with her chagrin, and a faint laugh escapes her.

Becoming conscious that Patricia is near her—her game with old Brown having come to an end—she beckons to her.

"Sing us something—anything," she whispers hurriedly; and Patricia with a smile obeys, and gives them a little pretty French thing with a *verve*, a freshness, for which her guests are hardly prepared.

She has a charming voice, cultured to the last degree, flexible and soft. Felix is openly delighted with it, and, forsaking for the time his allegiance to Lady Olivia, goes over to the piano to beg her to sing again. His begging enriches him. Patricia, having discovered with necessary politeness that Miss Brown is not musical, gives him song after song with quite a little friendly air, and every now and then a smile.

Sitting thus at the piano, with her fingers idly strumming sentimental chords, and her lips murmuring to him

friendly nonsense in between her songs, Patricia looks a thing to be desired. Her air is gracious; her voice is gay and suggestive of a possible *bonne camaraderie* in the future. Felix, looking down upon her, cannot fail to contrast her manner with the cold haughty demeanour of her elder sister. And yet—even in this early hour of the fate that is hurrying upon him—he well knows he would gladly exchange all Patricia's pretty smiles for one gentle glance from Imogen.

"Patricia," says Lady Olivia presently, "will you bring me Hugh's last photo to show to Mrs. Brown?"

This breaks up the *tête-à-tête* at the piano, as Patricia, rising instantly, leaves the room to bring her mother the picture in question. Hugh is the youngest amongst the boys, and, being an acknowledged beauty, is admired and idolised (to his intense discomfiture) by his fond mother, who cannot refrain from showing off her private Adonis when practicable to her large circle of friends. When the boy is not present in the flesh, his portrait is, as a rule, produced and made to do duty for him.

Patricia being gone, Felix drops back again into his former place near Lady Olivia, who, like all good-looking middle-aged women, is distinctly partial to young men—the younger the better, in fact—as then she can be taken into their entire confidence, and learn all about their college troubles, and administer to them what she considers golden advice in her pleasant, tender way. Need it be said that such partiality on her part is returned tenfold by its recipients? She is publicly adored, not merely by her own sons, but by the sons of half the county, who confide to her not only their few peccadilloes, but their numerous and heart-rending affairs of love.

All this is very agreeable to Lady Olivia's soul, but Felix has lived far beyond his college days, and has apparently no suicidal love-grievance upon his mind; and to have a young man who has no special misfortunes to relate, and who has two undeniably pretty girls in the room with him, choose *her*—Lady Olivia—as a companion for the evening, strikes her as being, to say the least of it, a very peculiar thing.

Things, it must be confessed, do not often strike Lady Olivia; but this comes home to her. Involuntarily, and hardly knowing why, she glances across the room to where Imogen is sitting, calm and self-possessed, saying polite nothings to Miss Brown, whom now it is her misfortune to have to entertain. She is in an intellectual purgatory, but she shows nothing of it. She looks serene and contented (*could* polite hypocrisy further go ?); and Lady Olivia, seeing no signs of a late combat on her face, resigns herself to believe that she and "the younger Mr. Brown"—she has not yet taken to heart his Christian name—did *not* come to loggerheads, and that Felix had not been driven to her (Lady Olivia) for shelter. Having assured herself of so much, she leans back in her chair with a sigh of relief, and permits herself to be amused by Felix.

Experientia docet ' When a quarter of an hour has passed, Lady Olivia, who has many and varied experiences, and who is quite a finished judge by this time of what a young man ought to be, says to herself, "Here is some one greatly to be liked!" And then, when another quarter has gone by, "I am speaking to a gentleman!" And then, when a third quarter has vanished into the greedy past, she says to herself emphatically, "This is a young man after my own heart!"

She is quite sure now that Imogen had been somewhat hasty in her estimate of *this* member of the family, at all events—and, indeed, of the others also; at least, of most of them.

Miss Brown honest Lady Olivia cannot say she likes as *yet* (the saving clause here comes in as a salve to her charity); but Mrs. Brown is quiet and agreeable, and the old man, in spite of his hearty laugh and his old-fashioned ways, is not what she (Lady Olivia) has been accustomed to consider vulgar.

In her good graces they stand as follows: Felix first, his father next, his mother after that.

With Patricia comes the father first, the son next, the women nowhere.

With Sandie, nobody in particular first, but Miss Brown

decidedly *last*! This after a long interviewing of the distasteful one.

As for Imogen, she has expressed no opinion even to herself, except that she thinks it will be a good thing for her and hers when these unwelcome guests are once more safely landed back again amongst their bales of cotton!

It has taken some time for all these different opinions to be arrived at. Eleven o'clock is now chimed by the dainty ormolu trifle upon the chimney-piece. The women rise from their seats; the men follow suit. Candles are lit in the hall, and accepted gracefully. Lady Olivia takes the initiative, as in duty bound, and leads the way to the bedrooms. The men adjourn to the smoking-room, and spend a useful hour or two endeavouring valiantly to ruin their constitutions.



Yet Lady Olivia is still sitting before her fire when Sir Hugh comes upstairs.

"Well, how do you like them?" asks he, when he has stripped off his coat, and is feeling quite comfortable in an unorthodox fashion that smells of Bohemia.

"I can hardly say as to *all* of them," says Lady Olivia, with some natural hesitation; "but with regard to the young man, my dear," brightening suddenly, "I am wonderfully pleased with him. I am quite prepossessed in his favour. He is everything that is agreeable to me. I have seldom seen a man of his years so—so sensible," winds up her ladyship, recalling to mind that pleasant little conversation in the drawing-room, in which he and she alone had held a part.

"Ah! *so*," says Sir Hugh, with all the air of a man who finds considerable relief in the discovery that someone agrees with him upon an opinion that up to this has appeared to him somewhat shaky. "I am glad of that," he goes on with a freer air; "he seems to me quite the thing, and very much to be liked. He is handsome, clever, and—agreeable." He was going to say "rich," instead of the last adjective, and only just stops himself in time.

Lady Olivia looks at him ; perhaps he has not altogether deceived her.

"If it were not for the cotton!" she says, with a faint sigh.

With a praiseworthy pertinacity she clings always to the first idea formed. The Browns may be proved everything the most desirable; but still the atmosphere around them would be in Lady Olivia's eyes heavily charged with innumerable freights of soft goods.

"Suppose we forget that?" suggests Sir Hugh. "To remember such old-world prejudices is to prove one's self out of the new. Is a man to be tabooed for ever because his great-grandfather dabbled in trade?"

"But it wasn't his great-grandfather; it was his father, dearest," corrects Lady Olivia; after which truism there is a pause.

Sir Hugh, coming closer to the fire, draws a chair near to his wife's and falls into a reverie that lasts exactly two minutes and twenty-five seconds. He rouses himself from it by an effort.

"People may say what they will, but, after all, there is nothing like money," he says, *à propos* of nothing apparently.

"He is certainly very charming," returns his wife promptly, to whom his mind is as an open book.

"Yes. One wonders where the trade-blood comes in. From his appearance one might believe him blood royal." There is a second somewhat shorter pause, and then: "I hear their wealth is fabulous, and he will inherit nearly all."

"If the wealth should be even greater than you say, he will grace it."

"So I think. His manners are very fine." Then, with a miserable assumption of indifference: "Did he seem—did either of the girls like him, do you think?"

"He liked Patricia," says Lady Olivia, with the straightforwardness that characterises her. "He seemed very pleased with her singing; and it occurred to me at one time that they were likely to be good friends."

"I would rather it had been Imogen," returns Sir Hugh slowly.

"Imogen would not entertain the idea for a moment," says Lady Olivia gently; "and, indeed, I would rather she should make a—a different match. With her beauty the world lies open to her to make a choice. And, besides, I feel sure she would never reconcile herself to the poverty of his birth."

"She should not be encouraged in such ridiculous ideas," declares Sir Hugh impatiently, who a score of years ago had been a very intolerant aristocrat. "He would be an excellent *parti* for any girl; and I hear he moves in the first society in town. Imogen's birth, backed by his money, would set them at the top of the social ladder at once."

"But I think it is Patricia he admires," his wife reminds him gently.

"True; I had forgotten that. I am sorry it should be so, and surprised also. Though the child grows marvellously pretty, she will never be fit to be compared in the same day with Imogen. I could hardly imagine a more beautiful creature than she appeared this evening when she came into the drawing-room just before dinner. Any man might be proud to win her. She was a degree more than Brown has been accustomed to, I fancy, because she seemed to take his breath away. I wish the son had admired her half as much."

"There is a fate in these things," says Lady Olivia dreamily; "and perhaps it is all for the best if he does prefer Patricia, because Imogen, I know, would never come round to your way of thinking."

"She ought to *learn* my way, then," mutters he testily.

"I don't think that, dear. These class-prejudices are more deeply ingrained in some natures than in others; and Imogen is naturally proud. She can hardly help that. If it is a fault, it is inherited. There was a time, Hugh, when you were proud too!"

Her zeal for her child has lent some gentle sternness to her voice; but as her husband, the one love of her youth, turns his face to hers in some surprise at her unwonted tone, her valour dies. Steadily they regard each other for a full minute, and then:

"We are not so rich as we were," says he, in a low and saddened tone.

"No, my love—no, we are not," returns she with infinite tenderness, slipping her smooth hand into his.

There is much comfort in her touch; and her husband takes the gentle hand and holds it firmly. For a long time they sit thus, hand-in-hand, in a dead silence. Then Sir Hugh, rising with a faint sigh, kisses his wife, and goes away to his dressing-room; but Lady Olivia lingers still before the fire, speechless, motionless, thinking of many things.

CHAPTER V.

“A face that should content me wond’rous well
Should not be fair, but lovely to behold;
Of lively look, all grief for to repel
With right good grace, so would I that it should
Speak, without words, such words as none can tell.”

THE fact that Sylvia Yelverton, only daughter and heiress of Humphrey Yelverton, of The Wold, should be, at this time of all others, absent from home is regarded by the Heriots as a distinct grievance. She is not only their most intimate friend, but there is always a fund of delightful possibilities about Sylvia that renders her a treasure when help is desired.

She is a pretty girl, with hazel eyes and nut-brown hair, and a charming little nose tilted most delicately heavenwards. There is a tremendous amount of character in this nose, and indeed about Sylvia generally. Her mouth is large and softly good-humoured, and she has quite a beautiful manner of holding herself. She is, indeed, eminently satisfactory in most ways, her very stature being all it ought to be, and void of offence; it is of that happy order that can neither be termed short or tall.

She is quick-witted, clever, and tender, and is, perhaps, just a degree too independent to altogether accord with the rules conventional, laid down for the proper guidance of young women in Egworth.

She had not always been her father's heiress. A few years ago there was a Gerald Yelverton, the idol of his father's heart—a tall, fair-haired lad, a good deal older than his little saucy sister. But he had broken his neck out hunting, one bitter February morning, and had been

carried home dead in his pretty scarlet coat to the home he had left so gaily but an hour or two before.

After that old Humphrey had raised his head no more in the county. His heart within him was broken; his spirits lay buried in the grave that held his handsome boy—the last male scion of the old name. The once well-beloved music of the hounds, borne back upon the frosty air, now sounded in the stricken squire's ears like the dying knell of things that once had been. Pleasure of that sort was gone from him, but another source of subdued gladness still remained.

In his desolation he turned to the only other creature left him to love—the child Sylvia, who had been, if not neglected, at least barely noticed in her brother's lifetime. To her he clung as might a drowning man to a spar, and lavished upon her with a free hand all the remaining affection of which he was capable.

To wish, with the child—and much more with the growing girl—was to have. And so, as was prognosticated by every old maid in the village, Miss Yelverton grew up a little spoiled, a trifle self-willed, and—which was *not* foretold—beyond expression charming. What was more—perhaps the gravest offence in the eyes of Mrs. Grundy, as represented by the single goodies before mentioned—she did not care three farthings for the private or expressed opinion of any of them.

“Once let me *feel* I am right,” declared Miss Yelverton on one momentous occasion, “and I would not alter my opinion for that of any old tabby in Christendom!”

As the Heriots regard *her*, so does she regard them. For all and each she feels and expresses an earnest affection, Tom alone excepted. Between him and her there exists without cessation a perpetual warfare—a guerilla sort of entertainment, in which she generally comes off victor after reducing her adversary to powder. This animosity smoulders on occasions, only to break out again after a breathing-space with redoubled energy.

About this time the contest is at its height, Tom Heriot having rejoined his regiment this last time without so much as riding over to The Wold to touch his enemy's

hand ere his departure—a hitherto unheard-of piece of incivility on his part, and one that proves to the common mind that something more than usual has occurred between the belligerents, though what that something is, the most bare-faced and disgraceful curiosity could not discover.

A week before the arrival of the Browns at The Chevies, Miss Yelverton left her home to spend a month with an uncle of her mother's in an adjoining county, and could not, therefore, be reasonably expected back again for some time—a deep source of regret to the Heriots.

“Imogen,” says her mother, with a rather perplexed air, “whom shall we ask to meet them the day after to-morrow?”

She alludes to the unlucky visitors.

“You mean Monday?” says Imogen, looking up from the vase of flowers she is arranging with a somewhat abstracted expression. “It requires consideration, certainly. Let me see. We have shown them to the Grants and the Delmeges, so I suppose we had better say the Deverills this time, and the Moores. They will like a full view, as well as the others; and one can always have a man or two from the Barracks.”

“Well, that is arranged,” decides Lady Olivia, though somewhat dejectedly. “The only thing against your programme is that the Deverill girls are so sadly dull. Mary is not so bad, if her mother would only let her alone; but Jane!”

“Jane is as Nature made her,” puts in Miss Heriot calmly, refusing her lips the smile they long to bear.

“Then I wish Nature had been a degree more generous so far as wit is concerned,” says Lady Olivia mournfully. “In a drawing-room that girl is a great trial. Oh, how I do wish Sylvia was at home!”

“So do I, with all my heart. There is nothing heavy about Sylvia. But wishing won't bring her.”

“Won't it, indeed?” cries a frank, fresh young voice. It is the voice of Sylvia herself. She pushes the door a little further open and enters joyously, clothed in blue cloth from shoulder to foot, and with the daintiest riding-

whip imaginable in her hand. "See how you wrong your own powers." She laughs gaily, and kisses Lady Olivia and then Imogen. "You spoke and I am here. Surely a beneficent fairy attends upon you."

"Dear Sylvia," says Lady Olivia, with unfeigned gratitude in voice and manner, "I can hardly say how glad we are to see you. You have come just at the very right moment, and when we least expected you."

"You have come to save us," supplements Imogen, laughing.

"But how is it?" asks Lady Olivia, curiously. I fancied your grand-uncle had you safely in charge for quite a month to come."

"You should allow for contingencies," exclaims Sylvia, airily. "My grand-uncle and I quarrelled as usual; we all but came to blows this time, but were happily torn asunder at the supreme moment. Now we are separated by mutual consent—a great relief for all parties concerned. I can't think why he asks me down to that musty old Grange, as he persists in doing regularly once every year—when it always ends in quite the same way. *Now* we are at daggers drawn; but I bet you anything you like that, if he is alive, I shall have a long, affectionate invitation from him about this time next year precisely. I expect he is beginning to appreciate the effect upon his nerves of a right-down good blowing-up such as *I* give him; far better than a dozen tonics or a douche bath—and that *that* is why he persists in continuing his obstinate hospitality."

"Poor old man! He has fallen into terrible hands," says Lady Olivia, smiling. "But I thank him for giving you back to us, as we want you to help us next Monday to entertain some people who are staying with us."

"Yes, papa was telling me of them," answers Sylvia, and then stops a little abruptly.

"They are cotton-people, of no family whatsoever," explains Imogen, drily; and though she neither blushes nor looks confused, Miss Yelverton can see plainly that the advent of these Browns is a sore subject.

"What a blessing!" cries she briskly. "I am so heartily tired of all the cold irreproachable, extremely

dull blood that hems us in on every side. Ah! what a little shocked look, Imogen! But the truth, the truth, and nothing but the truth for me! I feel a touch of electricity run through me when I hear I am to make myself charming, not to those who can remind me of what is 'due to birth and position,' as Dame Deverill hath it, but to those beyond the pale."

"I like them—that is, some of them," says Lady Olivia diffidently. "But to you, dear, they will be strangers, and——"

"Ah! that is their greatest charm so far as I am concerned," interrupts Miss Yelverton lightly. "Being strangers, they cannot as yet be up to all my frightful crimes and misdemeanours. Perhaps at first, therefore, they will be gracious to me—will smile and give me honeyed words. I shouldn't wonder, indeed, if I even succeeded in captivating young Brown. There *is* a young Brown, eh?"

"Oh, yes," says Imogen, with a pretty shrug of her uncivil shoulders that plainly betrays how deeply grateful she would be if there were not.

"There is still hope, then. I may be able to take one incubus off your shoulders," laughs Sylvia. "That is," seriously, "if he is not already head over ears in love with you"—pointing to Imogen—"or Patricia. Which of them is it?" asks she mischievously, turning to Lady Olivia.

"Is it a necessity that one must lose one's heart in a week?" returns Lady Olivia, with an evasiveness that is hardly to be expected from her. "He shoots all day with Sandie, sees Imogen during dinner-time, and talks to Patricia for the half-hour that precedes the lighting of the bedroom candles: could he compress much love-making into these bare opportunities? You see the field is open to you."

As she says this, she calls to mind that late conversation with her husband in the bedroom some nights ago, and feels that her speech is slightly hypocritical.

"I do see," says Miss Yelverton, turning her clear hazel eyes first on Lady Olivia and then on Imogen. "He *talks* to Patricia—which means that Imogen will not be kind to

him, in spite of his unlimited thousands. I bless my stars that I was not born with aristocratic tendencies. Is he passable?"

"He is very handsome," replies Lady Olivia, seeing Imogen will not open her lips upon the subject.

"Young—rich—handsome! Ye gods! what more can you want?" cries Sylvia gaily. "With your permission, Lady Olivia, and *without* Patricia's, I shall certainly make my bow to this young man. Why, he will be quite a god-send in this barren countryside!"

She is still laughing when the door opens, and Sandie Heriot comes into the room.

"Sylvia! *you!*" cries he with undisguised delight. "I never anticipated such a happy surprise when I came here in search of—What has restored you to us so soon? Is it you indeed in the very flesh?"

"There isn't much flesh," says Sylvia mournfully. "That 'old man eloquent' wore me to skin and bone. Alas! what a tongue he has! It beats mine all to nothing. That will give you some idea of its staying power. I found in the long run I couldn't stand any more of it, so I came home, as much to his relief as my own."

"I can readily believe *that*," murmurs Sandie innocently; but with a perspicacity that belies his innocence, he makes a careful *détour* that places a round table between her and him.

"There is a limit even to impertinence, and you have reached yours," says Miss Yelverton, in a slow and solemn tone, regarding him with an eye full of fell determination. "On guard, Sandie! for vengeance dire and swift is descending upon you. Lady Olivia, with your permission!"

She makes a spring at the doomed Sandie, and round and round the table they go for several minutes, she in hot pursuit, he in as hot desire to escape her if he can. Having chased him at last into a corner, she lays her pretty gloved hands about his ears with right good will until he has cried "*Peccavi!*" a score of times; and then she desists, and looks up to find Felix Brown regarding

her with an irrepressible smile from the open doorway. She has no time to remember anything, and only grasps the fact that he is a remarkably distinguished-looking man, and that the whole scene is somewhat out of keeping with strict propriety. For once in her saucy life, she blushes crimson.

"You there—actually on the spot—and yet you never came to my rescue!" exclaims Sandie, gazing at him reproachfully, when he has recovered his breath. "Ah! it is a clever man who knows his friends from his foes. An hour ago I believed in you; a minute ago in Sylvia; and see to what a pass my childish trust has brought me! Miss Yelverton—Mr. Brown."

Miss Yelverton makes her little bow with a demureness that would lead one to believe she wouldn't hurt a fly to save her life.

"If I had only known you were there!" she murmurs sideways to Felix, making him a present of a swift coquettish glance from under her long lashes.

"She's blushing!" cries Sandie ecstatically. "It *is*—it *must* be the real thing, because there's no rouge about; but who would have believed it! Wonders will never cease! She is positively ashamed of herself when she thinks on her conduct to inoffensive me! Miss Yelverton, this slight display of feeling does credit to your 'ead and 'eart."

"He is very young, Mr. Brown," says Miss Yelverton apologetically, in a little carefully distinct whisper. "I hope you will excuse him. He is my friend; therefore I find it necessary to make allowances for him."

"Are all your friends thus kindly dealt with?" asks Felix, smiling. "How I wish I might dare to think that some day I should be included in your list!"

"To dare is to obtain," returns she, with a pretty laugh, "Some day—who knows?—I may call you too a friend."

"'Some day' is always vague. For how long am I to be put upon my trial? Don't make it *too* long!" pleads he, in his low, musical voice—a voice to which few women have been deaf.

"Shall we say a week?" demands Sylvia gaily. "Machia-

velli himself might be 'understanded of a woman' in a week."

"Of your grace, madam, a week it shall be," says Felix; and then he turns to Imogen, who is bending over a huge nankeen bowl full of late flowers. "In the meantime Miss Heriot, may I hope for a good word from you that may further my cause?"

"Certainly—*two* for so good a purpose," returns she graciously, lifting her head from her flowers, and smiling upon him the sweet cold smile that always chills to death his very heart's blood.

The room in which they are all assembled is not the library (though one might perhaps imagine it to be a very dissipated twig off such a stem), but one of those cosy, comfortable, eccentrically furnished rooms that find a place in most houses under the name of schoolroom, and is, perhaps, the pleasantest apartment in the whole of The Chevies. There is a good deal of panelling about it in old oak, and a few soft chintz-covered chairs of a lounging description; a Valery jar or two; a clock that keeps no time, and is, therefore, to be beloved; a faded but downy sofa, that courts sleep; an ancient armchair; a mahogany table, that has seen service, and a floor that could not be improved. It is a room utterly devoid of luxuries, in which the flowers for the drawing rooms and dining-rooms are arranged upon the aforesaid much-abused mahogany table; but it is, nevertheless, the best-loved retreat in all the house.

"Where is Pat?" asks Sandie suddenly——

The words have hardly left his lips when a glass door is thrown wide, and Patricia herself enters the room, accompanied by Elinor Brown, both laden with flowers.

Patricia, seeing the unexpected Sylvia, drops all her flowers upon the ground, and runs towards her.

"Sylvia!" she cries, with eager delight, enveloping that pretty creature in a pair of loving arms.

A little latter Miss Brown is introduced, and returns Sylvia's careless, kindly salutation with the faintest, stiffest little inclination possible.

"She is unbearable," Miss Yelverton assures herself,

even whilst enlightening Patricia as to the real cause of her return.

"It was the luckiest thing my coming when I did," she declares lightly, "else my death would have been laid at the door of that old man. I have saved him from Jack Ketch. But now that I have returned with all my limbs intact, I think the county should make it a matter for public rejoicing. Don't you think so, Imogen? Suppose we commence the county with Dick Bohun. He owes us a dance by this time, I am sure."

"Poor old man! We always seem to regard him as a fairy godfather of some sort, only created to arrange our pleasures," says Imogen with a smile and a little shrug.

"An excellent pastime for him too," declares Sandie.

"Dear Mr. Bohun! he was created for something better than that, though it is a sweet character too!" says Lady Olivia tenderly, glancing up from her conversation with Miss Brown.

"Get a horse, Sandie, and ride over with me to The Grange," commands Sylvia, forgetful of the late skirmish, in her new design. "If we find Mr. Bohun in the proper humour, we shall get our dance with no trouble at all. Papa shall give one afterwards, and"—with a little merry laugh—"Sir Hugh after that again!"

She hardly perceives the little chill that follows on her words. It is so natural to count upon The Chevies as a place where a dance is to be had when desired—Sir Hugh having kept open house for his neighbours until so lately, that as yet no one has had time to notice the falling-off in his hospitality—that now Miss Yelverton speaks of a ball there as of a thing that will surely be forthcoming at the right moment.

"Will you really go to The Grange! Why should we not *all* go?" asks Patricia eagerly. "It is quite the loveliest drive, and Miss Brown as yet has seen but little of our country. Do come, Imogen! Let us have the ponies round, and go a merry-making with Sylvia. It really is the most charming drive," she concludes, turning her bright face to Felix.

"Charming—and so is your idea; but I do not think I shall go," returns Imogen calmly.

Lady Olivia, who is just leaving the room, looks back at her.

"You haven't been out to-day; it would do you good," she says gently, but does not wait for an answer.

"Ah now, Imogen, why disappoint us?" complains Patricia fondly. "Mr. Brown and you in front; Elinor and I behind. *A parti carré* complete, all in one moment."

"To say nothing of Sandie and me as outriders!" puts in Sylvia. "Say yes, Imogen, and the thing is done. There is nothing to prevent you. The day will not rain. Your escort will be faithful. Mr. Brown, I feel assured, will not upset you in any dyke. Be persuaded, then!"

As once again her name is coupled with that of Felix Brown, Imogen flushes faintly, and draws back with a slight haste suggestive of extreme hauteur.

"I cannot go with you to-day, Silvia," she says gently, but very distinctly.

"'An' if she won't, she won't,'" quotes Miss Yelverton, with a slight shrug. "Well, I must leave you, as I have a word to say to Sir Hugh from my father. Coming, Patricia?"

"Mr. Brown," says Patricia, smiling back at him as she leads the silent Elinor to the door in Sylvia's wake, "*we* have failed. I leave it to you to persuade Imogen to come with us to The Grange."

They have all gone now, and Imogen, lifting her head, finds herself alone with Felix. Rising to her feet with the little graceful languor that belongs to her, she moves, without haste, to the door.

"Miss Heriot—one word," exclaims Felix, as he stands by the door ready to open it for her, his hand upon the handle. His lips are tightly set. "*Why* will you not go to-day with the others to The Grange?"

He waits impatiently for his answer, but none comes. Standing thus before her, gazing down on her lowered eyes and calm, unutterably lovely face, the possibility of loving and yet murdering a woman is borne in upon him.

"Speak!" he says vehemently. "Why is it that you will not go?"

"Perhaps because I do not care to," returns she, in a tone so quiet as compared with the ill-suppressed anger of his, that it serves to heighten the sense of injustice beneath which he is writhing.

"The fact that I am going has nothing to do with it?" questions he keenly. "I am not preventing you from accompanying your sister and your friend?"

"*You!*"

The word falls from her lightly, but there is a world of well-bred insolence in her tone. She takes one step nearer to the door, and he opening it mechanically, she passes through it to the hall beyond, and he is left alone.

As she disappears, the young man turns aside, and clenches his hands hard, but not a word escapes him.

* * * * *

Perhaps, all things considered, the poor pampered ponies would have preferred any other driver that day, and the girls a livelier companion; but *chè sara, sara*, so all have to put up with Felix, nilly willy. Once applying the whip a trifle too freely to the back of Gill, she resents it, and intimating her wrongs to Jack, they both start off upon an endless journey to Nowhere! But a steep hill and Mr. Brown's firm hand reduces them at last to something that resembles order.

During the rather trying half-mile in which they had bolted, Miss Brown had screamed a good deal, and had declared, as loudly as she well could, her disapproval of her brother's mode of driving; but of that disapproval her brother had taken little heed. There had been, indeed, a positive joy to him in the excitement caused by the ponies' viciousness; and when at last his sister's exclamations of fear had become known to him, he had turned upon her, and advised her in plain if carefully measured terms to restrain her excitement.

This rebuff, though gently delivered, awoke within the breast of Elinor dire wrath and a settled desire for vengeance. Setting her lips very closely together, she mentally

resolved upon having that vengeance on the first available opportunity.

The opportunity comes all too soon. As the ponies pull up at Mr. Bohun's door, and they are waiting for Sandie's knock to be acknowledged, she turns to her brother.

"What has distressed you to-day, Felix?" she asks, with premeditated sweetness. "You are a little unlike yourself, are you not?"

"Am I? I don't know, I'm sure. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, for no *purpose*," says Miss Brown, with increasing sweetness. "I was only a little anxious about you; that was all. I fancied," viciously, "you were a little offended in that your persuasive powers failed to bring Miss Heriot here with us to-day."

"What a little viper!" thinks straightforward Sylvia Yelverton indignantly, who has chanced to overhear this conversation, and has seen how Felix's sensitive face has painfully contracted and then coloured as painfully beneath his sister's cruel glance.

"Mr. Brown, come here and see what Sandie has done to my stirrups," she cries gaily, summoning Felix to her side, and thereby releasing him from his embarrassment and the scrutinising stare of his sister's cold eyes. "That boy grows more intolerable day by day. What! is there nothing *really* the matter with it? Well, if you tell me so, it convinces me I grow as stupid as he!"

Then the door is opened, and Felix taking *her* down from her saddle, they all enter the house.

Half-an-hour is spent indoors—half-an-hour that works wonders, as Sylvia in that time obtains her request, and arranges with her host all the preliminaries of a dance to be given at The Grange, to "celebrate her delivery from the clutches of Uncle Carden."

Mr. Bohun, an old man, handsome and vigorous, and an innocent slave to the wiles of all the pretty girls growing up around him, is an easy prey to their machinations, and with a free grace gives his promise for the dance desired.

Bidding him an enthusiastic farewell, they leave The Grange, turning once or twice to salute him afresh as he stands bareheaded upon the stone steps to watch their de-

parture. Then the corner is gained, and he is lost to sight, and the remembrance of home and the cup of tea that will attend on the chiming of the fifth hour of noon takes most of their thoughts into its keeping. But Felix Brown is almost beyond thought, and Miss Yciverton is full of it. Of two things, at least, this day has assured her: first, that the chestnut thoroughbred she is now riding goes easier in its stride than the little grey mare; and second, that Felix Brown is beyond all doubt very desperately in love with haughty Imogen Heriot.

CHAPTER VI.

"I have seen the desire of mine eyes—
The beginning of love."
"Or ever the stars were mad, or skies,
Grief was born."

"**He** is one of the effects of an effete civilisation," says Miss Yelverton, with a little dainty shrug of her soft round shoulders.

She is looking extremely attractive in her yellow lace, and the heavy Dijon roses that seem to nestle in it.

It is the Monday evening, for which the Deverills et Cie have been invited to dine at The Chevies; and Miss Yelverton, sitting in the drawing-room amongst the other guests, with Felix Brown beside her, is staring with some disdain at a lanky youth in the foreground, whose nose alone seems to be his strong point.

"He isn't much, certainly," returns Felix, laughing; "but what will you? If we were all alike, how monotonous would life become! If he chooses to believe in the harmless lily more than you or I do, surely it is to his credit, and gives one an assurance of the purity of all his intentions. That he should wear his hair at an abnormal length, and that his complexion should be so sallow and his air cadaverous, suggest the idea that his belief is genuine and deep. 'Virtue is its own reward,' they say. Poor soul! I expect he will have to sup off that meagre allowance."

"I wonder he doesn't sink through the floor with shame when he sees himself in the mirror," says Miss Yelverton, totally unmoved by her companion's defence of the misguided aesthete. "If to love 'the beautiful' is the be-all and end-all of one's happiness, it is a pity he can't brighten himself up a bit. He doesn't *seem* happy. He looks as

though light-heartedness of any description would be impossible to him. But, as you have just hinted, diversity is necessary. See over there, that man with the reddish hair; he is commonplace, if you like, but reasonable."

"That is Lord Clanbrassil. He came with the Deverills being a friend or cousin, or something or other of theirs. He arrived at their place quite unexpectedly this evening; so Mrs. Deverill brought him on here with her, because, as she told Lady Olivia, she didn't know what to do with him! Lady Olivia expressed herself as pleased with his presence; and, as you see, he is being very civilly entertained withal."

He points to where the young lord in question is standing, bending in a somewhat *empressé* manner over Imogen, who is seated in a lounging-chair covered with a primrose damask that contrasts very excellently with the deep blood-colour of her satin gown. He is a middle-sized young man, rather stout than otherwise, with nondescript features, and hair that inclines obstinately towards the "celestial rosy." There is, indeed, nothing at all particular about him, in spite of the fact that he can count the mouldy bones of his ancestors as far back as he likes. His mouth is quite half an inch or so too large for his face, and his ears are prodigious. His cheek-bones are unpleasantly prominent, as though defiant of the "too, too solid flesh" that surrounds them! and his eyes, though blue, might be bluer! Yet in these last features there is lurking a happy, genial light that alone would have redeemed an uglier man.

He is in truth a very kindly young man, and a general favourite with those who know him: more especially is he tenderly regarded by the younger members of the Deverill family, who look upon him fondly enough in the light of a brother—time having convinced them that their chances are not of that lucky order that would change his position from cousin to husband.

The elder Miss Deverill is a tall girl, gawkily inclined, possessed of a crooked eye, a talent for listening to the conversation of even younger sons, and a bright, clever expression. Her sister is too ugly to bore anyone with a description of her.

"Ah," says Miss Yelverton, looking hard at the unconscious young man with the all but red hair; "yes, *he* is not effete, certainly. I think I rather like him; his appearance is *for* him."

"So is his title," remarks Felix, with a smile that drains his speech of bitterness; "most women like that sort of thing."

"Do they? You seem to have a large knowledge of our sex, and a curious one. But to return to 'our fat friend' over there, who would have thought of *him* as belonging to the purple. He is ordinary in the extreme—though I confess to a fancy for the very solidity of him. 'England, beef, and beer,' seems written on every feature. And yet, now that one knows of it, the title seems to set him off."

"Like buckles on shoes," says Felix, sententiously.

As he speaks, he lifts his eyes and fixes them on Imogen.

She has her beautiful face slightly uplifted, and is smiling at Lord Clanbrassil as surely she never smiled at him—Felix! And he, this favoured stranger, is looking back at her with a strange admiration in his glance, and is apparently abstracting great joy from the low, soft-toned converse he is holding with her.

Felix, growing deadly pale, withdraws his eyes with an effort, to find Miss Yelverton is regarding him not so much curiously as tenderly.

"'Great wealth of golden hair.' I always think of those words when I look at Imogen," she says gently, with *such* a pretty smile. "And she has a heart as golden as her head. I want you to know that, because"—she pauses abruptly, and looks up at him—"because she is my friend. Do you know"—leaning a little towards him, the smile dying from her lips—"she would not marry a man as other women might, for his money or his rank, but only because she loved him! That is a sweet and a true character, is it not?"

"Very sweet, and unutterably true! Do you gild all characters with the reflex of your own?" asks Felix smiling.

"A cleverly stupid speech!" returns she, as she lays her hand upon his arm, and follows the others in to dinner.

All through dinner Clanbrassil devotes himself exclusively to Miss Heriot, whilst she—what little demon possesses her?—wakes from her habitual coldness, and fairly dazzles her companion with her brilliant glances and unchecked smiles—her voice "ever soft, gentle, and low"—that most "excellent thing in women,"—and all the tender wiles that women have in their possession as barbed arrows for the subduing of the great enemy, man!

Felix, watching her from the other end of the table, draws his breath a little quickly, and a dull sense of the entire emptiness of things in general comes heavily down upon him.

"What a pity it all is!—what a little tragedy there is going to be!" thinks Sylvia, who almost immediately has grasped the situation, and is feeling more than politely sorry for the man beside her.

Imogen, had she known it (*did* she know it?), might have eased the pressure lying on his heart by a simple remedy that would have cost her nothing. One gracious glance, one fleeting smile, in his direction, would have done it, but both glance and smile are withheld. She smiles, instead, upon her new admirer, and charms him with an assiduity that compels Sylvia, who is not easily roused, to know extreme surprise.

Once only is it permitted to Felix to meet Miss Heriot's eyes before she leaves the dining-room, and then but for an instant only, as he holds the door open for her to pass through. Some nail or some slight projection having caught her gown in the doorway, she comes to a stand-still. He stoops to release her from the momentary thralldom, and, as he straightens himself again, their eyes meet.

In hers lie only cold, mute thanks; in his—whatever it is she sees in his, it causes her to bow with somewhat nervous haste, and move up the long hall after the others with quickened, petulant steps.

Lady Olivia, looking at her by chance a minute or two later, breaks off her conversation with Mrs. Deverill, and

goes up to where she is standing with only Elinor Brown near her.

"Imogen, darling, how pale you look!" says Lady Olivia in a subdued tone and with an anxious air. "Are you ill, child, or only cold? Come closer to the fire: these sudden chills are dangerous."

"She was startled a moment since," interposes Miss Brown, who has overheard her, coming forward in her still, quiet way: "and it was all my brother's fault. I fear."

She looks with hypocritical apology at Imogen, and Imogen looks back at her with a steady stare that somewhat discomfits her.

"Pray cease to be miserable on that score," says Miss Heriot, without removing her eyes. "Your brother has had nothing whatever to do with the little chill that is oppressing me."

The words are polite; the tone and the expression of the half-closed eyes insolent in the extreme. Miss Brown shrinks beneath them.

"Your dress!" she stammers. "I feared Felix had torn it, or spoiled it, or——"

"And if he had?" asks Imogen, still regarding her fixedly from that terribly elevated plane.

The question absolutely crushes Miss Brown. What has she done? What economical sentiments has she not betrayed? She trembles at the thought that probably she has thus irredeemably committed herself—the inward workings of the mind of the half-bred Elinor leading her to the belief that reckless extravagance is an attribute of the nobly born.

"I merely thought he had been awkward with you," she begins, and then falters and stops short.

Imogen, lifting her fan lazily from her side, unfurls it. A little contemptuous smile curls her lips.

"I do not think Mr. Brown will ever be awkward with me in any way," she says slowly; and, turning with leisurely grace to one side, moves to where Mrs. Deverill is sitting.

But she seems restless, *ennuyée*, and presently rising again from the lounge, wanders towards a distant window.

Outside runs a balcony, that gleams marble white in the brilliant moonlight. It is a marvellously sweet night for one so far passed into the autumn; and Imogen, whose cheeks have changed from palest white to warmest crimson, feels a sudden intense longing to quit the heated room and pass into the cool beyond. Oh, to bathe for even one moment her flushed face in the tender cold of the starry night!

With noiseless touch she pushes open the yielding sash, and finds herself part of the silent scented darkness, with a faint wind fanning her, and the deadness of sleeping nature all around.

A tall slight figure, clad in its blood-red gown, she stands, grasping with one feverish hand, that is scarcely less white than the rays that cover it, the marble balustrade, whilst her gaze wanders restlessly, hardly seeing them, over the shadowy gardens beneath.

The night is full of a mystic wonder: a strange melancholy silence seems to have fallen upon it. Wild thoughts of *faience* and magic lore stir in the heart of the girl, staring with troubled eyes into the immeasurable depths of unknown calm before her. Not a breath is stirring in the perfumed shrubbery; beyond them the lake, still, rippleless, may be seen in the vague glimmers cast by the moon. On its brink it is possible to believe that

“With water-weeds, twined in their locks of gold,
The strange, cold forest fairies dance in glee.”

Miss Heriot standing thus, clad in her shining draperies, with body slightly bent over the balcony, looks a most perfect queen of night, or very fitting Juliet, could there but be a Romeo!

A sound of coming footsteps. Imogen, lifting her eyes, tries to pierce the darkness to her left. Far down, another window opens on this balcony, and through it an intruder has stepped into her reverie, that has not been all too sweet. It *may* be Lord Clanbrassil—nay, it seems to her in her sudden agitation that it *must* be. She takes a step forward in his direction, and, even as she does so, Felix Brown's voice falls upon her ears.

“Dreaming, Miss Heriot?” he asks lightly.

Imogen starts perceptibly. Her thoughts, whatever they are, have been perhaps too far away or perhaps too near, however it is, she rouses herself by a visible effort before she answers him.

"Almost," she murmurs faintly.

Her face looks strangely pale in the cold light of the moon, and her blue eyes look like black velvet in the pallor of their setting.

"But the night is too cold for such romantic doings. You"—with an indifferent smile—"have shown me my folly, for which I thank you. I shall return to the drawing-room."

"One moment," entreats he, hurriedly.

There is enough passion in his voice, though it is subdued, to attract her. She pauses involuntarily, and, with wondering eyes uplifted to his, replaces her hand upon the balustrade.

"*Why* will you not be friends with me?" demands he, with a sudden burst of vehemence after a troubled pause.

"Friends!" echoes Imogen, in a low shocked tone. "Have I, then, offended you? I did not know; but if it is so, believe me—*do* believe I never meant it. I fancied I was treating you as I treat all my other acquaintances."

"You fancied wrong," returns he hastily, his grey eyes aflame. "You treat no one as you do me. Upon all the others you know how to bestow a smile—a kind word or two in season; but on *me*——And in what have I sinned? Miss Heriot, I wonder—I *wonder*, if you could only guess how much your simplest words are to me, would you be so chary of them!"

He is so far carried away by the intensity of his emotion that he fails to see, to mark the signs of rising storm upon her listening face.

"Do you know what you are saying?" she asks at last, in a low, compressed tone. She might perhaps have gone further, but he interrupts her.

"I know well," he affirms passionately. "I know I would rather have your most careless friendship than the love of any other woman! I know I would rather have your *hatred* than what I fear now—your indifference!"

The moon has disappeared behind a sullen cloud, and, as though suddenly, all the world around them has grown dark. Miss Heriot's lips are tightly compressed, and the filmy laces that only partially veil the beauty of her neck are strangely agitated. An expression of haughty displeasure is darkening her eyes. She *feels*, though she cannot see him, that her companion is trying to pierce the momentary gloom with a view to gaining some insight into her soul. This act of his seems to her, in her unreasoning anger, to be little less than a deadly affront. He shall read no thought of hers, she tells herself, with a proud reliance on her own strength; her face shall not betray to him the vaguest fancy of her brain.

Then all at once the clouds roll on, and the moon shines forth again with redoubled vigour; calmly she sails along her mighty dome, whilst her rays drop into the darkling depths beneath, and "all the stars make gold of all the air."

Felix is still standing immovable, gazing upon the statuesque figure and calm impassive features of the girl beside him—features that give no index to the heart. She seems such a beautiful thing—a piece of Nature's most perfect work; but so cold—so hard—so incapable of any divine feeling.

In silence he gazes, wondering, in a minute of time, how so fair and sweet a creature can be so utterly devoid of all tender characteristics, when a man's step sounding upon the gravel beneath stirs her from the settled pose she has involuntarily taken.

The step has touched some cord within her. Instantly the marble statue springs into life. Her whole expression changes. A sudden glad expectancy, an eager animation, lights up all her lovely face, rendering her infinitely more beautiful than Felix has ever yet seen her.

She moves lightly to the top of the stone steps that lead to the ground beneath, and waits with a pretty impatience for what may come.

Felix waits, too, his eyes fixed on her, enduring the tortures of the doomed for that one immeasurable minute.

Then it is all over. A tall grey-clad figure emerges from

the darkness, and, seeing Imogen, throws an arm round her neck and embraces her warmly.

It is somewhat too light-hearted an embrace to be born of a rival (is there not a touch of sorrow in all true love?), and a shadow of comfort falls into Felix's agony. In another instant the agony is all dispersed, and relief so blessed as to be almost a second pain takes its place. It is only Tom Heriot after all!

"Tom!" exclaims his sister with a rapturous little laugh. "What a joy! What a delicious surprise!"

Then she recollects her guest, and, moving a little aside, makes a gesture as if to introduce the two young men. But introduction is unnecessary here.

"I say, Brown! you here! *By Jove!* never heard of it! Odd how things happen, eh?" says Captain Heriot, a smile brightening his friendly eyes. "Your father and mother and Miss Brown well, eh? *No* glad."

That Felix Brown and her brother should be acquainted is news to Miss Heriot. She says nothing, but allows a glance of extreme surprise to cross her face.

Felix laughs.

"We've been here a week or more," he says, "and have been having such a good time. The *matr* is inexpressibly fond of the country, you know; and this place of your father's is quite the most perfect thing of its kind I ever saw."

"Not a patch on yours, nevertheless," says Tom. "*That's* a 'dream-palace,' if you will! So awfully pleased that you'll be down here whilst I am. It would have been a second inducement to come had I known it."

"Miss Heriot, don't you think we ought to go indoors!" asks Felix. "Moonshine and breezes are all very well in July; but just now they are, perhaps, a degree more charming when regarded from the *other* side of the window."

There is not a trace of his late passion in his tone, and for a moment Imogen's eyes rest upon him.

"Yes, you're right," says Tom. "She'll have no end of a cold if she stays out here much longer. I never was so surprised in my life as when I came up these steps

and found you two spooning on the balcony. Quite a new idea, by Jove! 'A moonlight romance' in *November*! Ha, ha!" laughs Tom, with that happy *insouciance* that belongs to him, and is such a mixture of Sandie and Patricia.

Miss Heriot draws back, and a little suspicion of extreme disdain curls her lips. Felix pales.

"It was warm," he says slowly. "Miss Heriot came out to get some air. It was inconceivably warm, and——"

"Just so!" interrupts Tom gaily. "It always *is*, I notice, when there's a girl on the balcony."

He goes a little closer to the window and looks into the room.

"I had no idea there was a dinner on for to-night," he continues *sotto voce*, "or I'd have come by an earlier train, in spite of the Colonel. There's old Mother Deverill, by all that's lovely! 'Warranted to wear,' should be printed on her gown. And there's 'My pretty Jane,' all smiles and teeth, as usual; and there's Mrs. Moore, and——Look here, Imogen—who is the young man in tights, to whom Patricia is making herself so agreeable?"

"Mr. Golightly, of the Tenth. Perhaps he doesn't intend it, but his clothes always *do* seem too small for him."

"Patricia seems to like tights," says Tom. "She is positively beaming upon their victim. See! as she speaks to him, how love lights her eye."

"Patricia is always kind to that sort of person," declares Imogen, as though she were alluding to a lunatic or a South Sea Islander. "She quite sacrifices herself to their comfort for the time being."

"'She soothes the savage breast' by 'outward application only.' Wise girl! Who, by-the-bye, is the man over there in the corner, talking to nobody and looking moodily on space?"

"That is Lord Clanbrassil. He came with the Deverills. He is either a nephew or cousin of Mrs. Deverill."

"I fancy he would be glad if she had left him at home,

with an armchair in the chimney corner and a cigar. He looks out of sorts, as if he had lost his place somehow, and were looking for it on some irresponsible page. Poor beggar! You ought to go in and cheer him up a bit."

Nobody seconds this proposition, and presently Captain Heriot turns away from the window.

"Go in, my dear girl, and don't risk rheumatism," he says affectionately. "As for me, I shall just go round by the back way, and keep myself dark until the 'outdoor relief' people have taken themselves off."

"Come in at once, Tom. What *nonsense* about your dress! Nobody will consider it when they know how far you have travelled. And, then, just think what a glad surprise it will be to mamma!"

"Yes, *do* come," says Felix.

"Dear fellow! *What!* to go in amongst that chosen lot, in morning clothes at this hour? Just consider the result! Would you have me throw discredit upon the house of my fathers? Why these Deverills are so nice that they would not know exactly how to treat a young man who could so far insult etiquette (etiquette is a strong point with the good old county folk) as to turn up at half-past ten in grey tweed! I assure you such an act would for ever ruin me in their good graces. Imogen, I will bid you a fond good-night, and be visible again some time to-morrow, when you have gently broken the news of my arrival to my sorrowing relatives. Is my old room appropriated by anyone? Can I have it?"

"Certainly you can have it. It is kept sacred to your memory."

"A good thing for you, Brown," says Tom, laughing. "If they had put you into it, I'd have fought you for it until one or both of us lay dead upon the ground."

"Never mind your room now," interrupts Imogen entreatingly. "Don't mind it for an hour or two! Do you think I shall so easily let you slip from my grasp when I have only just regained you? I tell you, sir, you are my prisoner, and if you make even an effort at escape I shall ring the alarum bell and rouse the household. So

now bethink you ! And besides, Tom, you can't imagine how well you look in grey."

"I can," says Tom modestly, "at any hour from twelve to three. But just now——"

"Sylvia is inside," puts in Miss Heriot, *à propos* of nothing.

"Oh, is she ?" replies Tom.

He had been carelessly indifferent in his manner before, but now the indifference has grown to a height that is positively remarkable.

"Come, *do* !" says Imogen.

"Well, on your own head be it," laughs he, "should Mrs. Deverill retire in confusion."

And Imogen leading the way, he follows her obediently into the brilliant scented drawing-room, Felix bringing up the rear.

Miss Yelverton, who is sitting in a low lounging-chair, glances up with a sudden start as Captain Heriot, not seeing her, passes by and goes up to where Lady Olivia is talking to Mrs. Brown. Stooping over his mother, he lays his hand gently on her shoulder.

He is not a handsome young man—he is, in fact, the plainest Heriot of them all ; but there is a charm beyond mere beauty in the tender, loving glance he bends upon his mother.

Lady Olivia turns, and a little faint cry escapes her in her intense surprise and joy. He is her eldest born, the beloved of her heart, and she welcomes him accordingly. He has been absent in Ireland for many months, and had not apprised them of his coming, so that his advent is all the more to be enjoyed. Miss Yelverton alone, after that one involuntary start, has taken no notice of his presence, and has apparently lost herself again in the animated discussion she was just then holding with a hook-nosed plunger from the Bigton Barracks.

"How d'ye do, Miss Yelverton ?" says Captain Heriot presently ; and Sylvia, lifting her eyes in a little slow bored sort of way, gives him her hand coldly enough.

"You have returned ?" she remarks, with a rather wintry smile

"So it seems," returns Tom. "After a long absence you can't think how happy it makes a fellow to receive so warm a welcome as you have given me."

"Has your absence been a long one? You see, I know nothing about it, as you gave me no chance of remembering when it was you last left home."

"And whose fault was that!" asks he gently.

"Was it mine?" There is just a suspicion of tears beneath the long dark lashes. "I don't think I ever forbade you to come and say good-bye to me at the Wold."

"Not in words, perhaps. But there are crueller things than words!" Here he drops into a chair close—*very* close—to her, and smiles faintly. "Was it a bad dream?" he asks in a low tone, "or is it really true that somebody, a few months ago, told me she *hated* me?"

"And I dare say she will tell you so again before she dies," returns Sylvia, with a little gay laugh. "Meantime Tom, let me tell you now that I am very, very glad to see you here again!"

"Are you really, Sylvia?" whispers Tom, softly.

After which, I am afraid the gallant plunger from Bigton, in spite of his hooked nose, gets very little more of Miss Yelverton's attention.

CHAPTER VII.

“Hope of ill gain is the beginning of loss.”

“Honour being then above life, dishonour must
Be worse than death; for fate can strike but one—
Reproach doth reach whole families.”

THE world is ten hours older. The bright, if chilly, morning sun is gleaming through the windows. Too bright a sun to make rejoice the hearts of hunting-men, but a delicious one for all other purposes. The meet being near at hand to-day, the men are dawdling somewhat over their breakfasts, and swearing mentally at the ever-growing radiance of the mighty Pæan, Nimrod of heaven, whose day to go a-hunting it certainly cannot be. Doubtless the divine pursuer, when feeling thus inclined, chases the nimble stag or wily boar behind a cloud!

“Three letters for you, Patricia, and one for *you*,” says Sir Hugh, smiling courteously at Miss Brown as he hands her a dainty little missive. “Nothing for you, Mrs. Brown, or for you, Imogen, or indeed for anybody else, except Sandie. Can’t congratulate you on the colour of them, Sandie?”

He laughs a little, and flings Sandie two unpleasant-looking envelopes of the deepest shade in indigo, and one white one.

Sandie, who up to this has been deep in the mysteries of a game pie, starts perceptibly, and casts a hasty glance at his correspondence. The letters have fallen a little short of his coffee-cup, and lie with the blank sides turned uppermost. Two, as I have said, are “deeply, darkly, beautifully blue;” but the third is of a different stamp, altogether, being of unimpeachable appearance all round,

and decorated with a most imposing crimson crest topped by a coronet. The colour of the die is so glaring that in a moment it attracts general attention.

Imogen, looking up a minute or two later, sees that the lad's face is in a manner strange to her. He has changed somehow in that short time—has grown terribly pale and quiet, and is still staring at the coroneted letter with an unconsciously strained expression.

It is so unusual for Sandie to be silent for even a moment, that presently Captain Heriot's attention wanders to him.

"Bowled you over, Sandie?" asks he, laughing. "Given you the sack, eh? You'll be glad of it, I dare say, when you meet the next one. She'd be awfully flattered if she could only see your face just now."

"Not so bad as that," returns Sandie, with an effort that is not lost on Imogen.

He pulls himself together a bit, and with a *savoir faire* that does him credit, considering his years, throws off his strange depression and converses until breakfast comes to an end with almost feverish gaiety.

An hour later, however, as Miss Heriot ascends the western staircase and passes through the picture-gallery on her way to her mother's room, she is a little shocked to find Sandie lounging upon the seat in the mullioned window at the lower end of it, his head sunk on his hands, his whole attitude unpleasantly suggestive of one of the minor forms of despair. As she looks at him there arises before her the vision of a half-cut pasty, a pale, distressed young face, and a gaudily crested envelope.

Going up to him with a light swift step, she lays her hand upon his shoulder.

"Why, what is this, Sandie?" says she. "You will be late, you will miss your day altogether. The hounds will have found by this time."

"I'm not going out to-day," returns he sullenly, flushing a little.

He moves his shoulder with some faint suggestion of impatience, as if to shake from it her gentle fingers. But she will not be so easily discouraged.

"Anything wrong?" she asks, in the prettiest, most encouraging tone possible.

It encourages Sandie to much wrath. Rising hurriedly, he turns to face her with an angry frown and flashing, miserable eyes.

"Why can't I be left alone?' he demands indignantly. "Can't I sit here for one wretched half-hour without having the whole household at my heels to know why I do this, and why I don't do that? If I choose to sit here and screw my nose against the window-pane, and drive myself mad with agreeable thoughts, is that a *crime*? I won't stand it, Imogen, and that's the truth. It's enough to make a fellow——"

"Then there really *is* something!" interrupts Miss Heriot, very pale.

She takes no notice whatever of his absurd burst of irritation, but is evidently pondering gravely over some fear that has waked itself within her heart.

"No, there isn't," returns Sandie doggedly, but in a low voice, out of which all passion has died.

"Tell it to me," persists she, as though she has not heard his faint disclaimer.

"There is nothing to tell. What should there be?" cries he, with a weak return of his former anger.

He looks full at her with a praiseworthy attempt at boldness; but that outward calm, commonly supposed to belong alone to the happy possessors of an inward peace, doth not depict itself upon his woe-begone countenance. He may pose as he will, but the unquiet conscience speaks through his restless eyes. At last they fall before Imogen's steadfast gaze.

"Sandie," says she, coming nearer and pressing his arm, "surely it is not to *me* you will deny your confidence? It cannot, after all, be anything half so dreadful as your manner implies."

"Can't it, though!" returns Sandie, in a stifled tone.

"Well, whatever it is," entreats Miss Heriot, feeling now, however, a little uncertain, "let me hear it. I may be able—who knows?—to help you."

"Nobody can help me," declares the as yet unpublished

sinner, in a voice that suits his face *à merveille*—which is to say, that they are both lugubrious in the extreme.

"Still, let me try," persists Imogen, with a sinking heart.

"Well, *try* then!" exclaims the miserable Sandie, growing suddenly reckless. "Try as hard as you can, and see what will come of it. I didn't want to vex you about it, but as you *will* know why—why——Imogen, I owe Gerald Poyntz three hundred and forty pounds."

"Oh *no*!" exclaims Miss Heriot, shrinking a little; "*it isn't that!*"

In a moment all her father's difficulties present themselves before her, and she feels her soul sink within her as she contemplates this extra drag upon his meagre resources.

"Tell me what it all means?" she murmurs faintly.

"It means that I have been gambling at college, and have lost three hundred and forty pounds," returns Sandie, in a slow, sullen tone, that would have been brutal in face of her distress, but for the terrible self-abasement that is depicting itself upon his downcast features.

A silence falls between them.

"Of course the money must be paid," says Imogen, presently. "*It was* from Mr. Poyntz you heard this morning.

"From Sir Gerald—yes."

"He is a baronet, then? More shame for him, with his estates in hand, to play so high with a younger son like you. However, that is beside the mark. The thing to consider is, what is to be done?"

"Nothing can be done," says the poor boy, prophetically—"nothing! I am, as you say, a younger son. To raise this money is out of my power; so the sooner I proclaim myself a defaulter and a blackguard to the world, and rid you all of my presence, the better for everyone except"—with a bitter laugh that ends in a sob—"Sir Gerald. Yes, I shall quit the country at once. I know the governor can't help me; and, even if he could, to tell him of this would——" He breaks down openly.

"Let us think," says Imogen, "before we give way altogether to despair."

She slips her arm round his neck in the old sweet fashion, and lets her eyes rest on his as lovingly as if no cause for anger against him might lie reasonably in her breast.

"To think is to go mad!" exclaims her brother, clinging to her and encircling her with his arms. "I have long overdrawn my year's allowance, and we all know the gov. is too hard up to advance even another fifty, to say nothing of what I want. Besides, I—how could I tell him of it? Do you remember how he has warned us all against cards ever since we were *so* high?" with a movement of the hand. "That horrible old story about our ancestor, Montgomery Heriot, seems ever fresh in his mind. I think it would almost break his heart if he thought one of us had followed in that old reprobate's footsteps. He would think the family curse had broken out afresh in *me*! No; I could not tell him. I am, indeed, a worthy descendant of that gaming old knight. Yet, Imogen—I swear to you, Imogen, I never meant it! It all came about quite—quite without one's knowledge, as it were. And it was nobody's fault at all. You *must* believe that. At least, nobody's fault but mine."

"Go on," says Imogen, sadly.

"There was a wine—cards. Up to that I had always played low, and my luck was proverbial. But that evening at the Viscount's rooms, I think I lost my head. He never plays himself, though he is the most hospitable fellow alive; but others were there—Poyntz amongst them. He, Poyntz, was my adversary, and I lost steadily. What is the good of going into it?" cries the poor boy, vehemently. "The end remains: I lost the sum I told you of. And the worst of it is that Poyntz is distinctly hard up just now, and can't afford to wait."

"He must not wait, of course," says Imogen in a low tone. "He *must* be paid—even if——"

A sound in the corridor checks her. Patricia entering the gallery in her quick fashion, sees them *tête-à-tête* and somewhat dull of appearance.

"Oh dear! what can the matter be?" sings she, at the top of her clear, sweet voice, advancing leisurely towards

them. The words, so singularly appropriate, though unmeant, echo coldly through the gallery and the hearts of her hearers as she comes swiftly towards them over the polished floor.

Her advent, unexpected as it is, leaves Miss Heriot and Sandie dumb.

"Why, you two!" cries Patricia, gaily, "what aileth you? Are you stricken mute, that you thus stand voiceless in the glad sunlight? Has the Holy Friar of our establishment appeared unto you and deprived you of the organs of speech? Imogen; do you know you remind me of some mediæval saint as you stand so, leaning against that arch, with the light of the painted window falling athwart your early-century nose! There is a dim, religious ghostly sort of effect about you and it, that—Good gracious. Sandie! what is the matter with *you*?"

Miss Heriot glances nervously at her brother, and then at Patricia, with a slight uplifting of her brows, as if she would have said, "Do not press the matter *now*!" But Sandie intercepts the look.

"Tell her," he says dismally "What's the good of keeping secret, to-day, what will probably be known to all the world to-morrow?"

Whereupon Patricia is made a present of his uncomfortable tale, and, contrary to all expectation—she being regarded generally as the easiest going of all the Heriots—is supremely indignant upon the spot. She, indeed, covers the cowering sinner with scorn, and, if looks could do it, would have rent him limb from limb.

"It is the most disgraceful thing!" she winds up at last, when she has grown a little tired, and Sandie is on the point of open rebellion. "I never heard anything like it—*never*! You ought to be thoroughly ashamed of yourself! I only hope you are! No, Imogen, I will not stop. It is useless your shaking your head at me behind his back. I am quite determined to say all I have got to say; and that is saying a great deal. That one of us, for his own selfish gratification, should behave like this, when poor papa—as we all know—is in such dreadful difficulties, seems to me to be—*No*! Imogen, I will *not* be silent!

You may spend your life glossing over the faults of others if you like; but *I* am not an angel, and I sha'n't—so there!"

"If any good could arise from—from such *very* hard truths, such as you utter," says Imogen, with some mild reproach, "I would say, go on. But as it is——"

"It is true," cries Patricia impetuously, "my eloquence does no good. The root of the thing lies in the fact that the money must be paid. But *how*, Sandie?" turning to him for the first time; "*how*?"

"If I could answer you," says the young man, wrathfully, "I would not be here at this moment. You are right, Patricia" (he very seldom calls her "Patricia"). "Be down upon a fellow when he is floored. It is the way of the world, and one should run with it. Have *you* nothing to say?" cries he, turning to Imogen, who is standing, tall and silent, beside him. "Why don't you take the winning side, too? It will save you a lot of trouble later on. Or is it," with a touch of anguish, "that I am *beyond* your censure? Have you given me up altogether? If so, I know it is only what I deserve."

Miss Heriot, moving abruptly away from the oaken window-frame against which she has been leaning, goes up to him and lays her hand upon his shoulder.

"Poor, *dear* old fellow!" she says softly.

And Sandie, touched to the very soul by this sweet sympathy, looks up at her. She smiles. And then somehow he gives way altogether, and, catching her in a grateful boyish embrace, bursts into tears.

This display of honest contrition is too much even for the irate Patricia. She gives in at once to the sentiment of the moment, and repents herself of her righteous anger. She goes even further. Stealing up to the sobbing young culprit, she steals her fingers round his neck, and presses an eloquent kiss upon the one small portion of his ear that is visible.

As both the girls hang round him in this fashion—patting the sinner as it were, into shape, until an uninitiated looker-on might possibly deem him an angel suffering—Felix Brown comes leisurely up to them in a rather muddy

scarlet coat. The gallery, at all times somewhat dim, hides from him the meaning of the tableau until he is quite close to it. But the unmistakable distress of all three concerned in it, is distinctly apparent when he is close—so apparent that to pretend to be ignorant of it would be rather a *bitise* than a kindness.

"I—I'm awfully sorry," he says, coming to a dead stop and flushing crimson. "To intrude in this rough manner is unpardonable; but I did not know, I could not tell——" He breaks off with extreme confusion, and then all at once recovers himself and turns his eyes on Imogen. "Now that my blunder is irretrievable," he continues gently, "can I not atone for it? Is there nothing I can do?"

He hesitates. Patricia looks up eagerly. Here is a golden opportunity! Here is, in other words, a golden young man, with nothing on earth to do with his money, and unquestionably good-natured.

Is there nothing he can do? Is there not *everything* that he can do, if he only will; that is, if only Imogen will lift those steadily lowered eyes and look at him?

As though in compliance with her secret desire, Imogen at this moment does lift her eyes, and answers his veiled suggestion—answers it very distinctly indeed, but hardly in the spirit for which Patricia had longed.

"Nothing," she says coldly, "You are very kind," with a pale little smile that thrills him, "but you can be of no help to us at all."

"How can you be sure? Let me at least *try*," implores he earnestly.

"He has forgotten Patricia, Sandie, *all* but her—the tall slender girl, with her sad, haughty eyes and meek hands folded as though in prayer.

Through the painted window the sunlight streams in coloured rays, casting a subdued glory on her bent head, and lighting up the purple of her gown.

"Impossible!" returns she evenly. "You do not understand. How should you? It is a thing in which no stranger could take a part. Thank you very much, all the same."

Bitterly offended as he is, there is nothing left for him

to do but to turn aside and bow, and go upon his way. That little word, "stranger," has hurt him inexpressibly.

Patricia, understanding vaguely what he is feeling, runs after him.

"How come you here, Sir Knight, at such an hour?" she asks, with a kindly attempt at gaiety, though in truth her heart is sinking.

"An accident. My horse came to grief, though not seriously," returns he, smiling gravely at her. "But my day is spoiled, nevertheless."

"In what a melancholy tone you say that!"

"Too melancholy, you think? Well, to suit it better, let me say, then, my *life* is spoiled. Is that more in unison with my tone?"

He laughs, and, moving quickly away from her, is soon beyond her sight, but not beyond his own thoughts: *they* pursue him remorselessly. What a stress she had laid on that word "stranger!" How obnoxiously it had sounded in his ears as applied by her to him! How cold, how distinct, had been her voice when saying it! How——

Where the mischief has Thompson put his brushes? That fellow is growing more beastly careless day by day. To dismiss him would be the right course; yes, the right —— With what a steady cruelty she had said it. "Stranger!"—is she determined he shall never be more to her than *that*? He presses his lips together, and a strange look grows upon his face.

Meantime the cause of his bitter reflections is still standing in the gallery where he had left her, with a kind little white hand pressed on Sandie's shoulder.

"Don't let mamma see you just now. Go and make yourself presentable for luncheon," she is saying tenderly. "And before you come down take that dreadful look off your face."

But to go down to luncheon is a thing that the stricken Sandie assures her is quite beyond him. Why should he clothe himself in fine tweed and finer linen, wash his face and brush his hair, when the "crack of doom" is sounding in his ears, and he knows that the first bit he ate would infallibly choke him?

All this seems dreadful to Miss Heriot! To see the erstwhile genial Sandie so down-spirited is bad enough, but to hear him refuse his luncheon is ten times worse. He must be very far gone indeed when he can declare himself indifferent to the goods the gods of the lower regions, as represented by cook and kitchenmaid, are preparing for his delectation. She is just beginning to argue with him on the subject, and the presupposed strangulation, when Patricia breaks in upon her purpose somewhat abruptly.

"I have an idea!" she declares solemnly. Imogen appearing sufficiently impressed by the novelty of this announcement, she goes on. "I have a plan," she continues, with increasing dignity. "Say nothing further about this unfortunate affair to anybody until I give you leave; and put your trust in *me*!"

"But what is it?" asks her sister anxiously.

Sandie, too, struck by her manner, plucks up a bit, and draws nearer.

"It is a *plan*," repeats Patricia, the calmness of conscious strength upon her brow. She declines to explain further, and turning to the door marches away from them with colours flying.

All through luncheon, which, after all, is graced by Sandie's presence, she assumes the air of a sphinx; and when at last she leaves the room, it is to mutter a word or two in the ear of her maid. This word brings Jenkins, the groom, to the hall-door in less than twenty minutes, with the younger Miss Heriot's favourite mare, Zuleika. To mount and away is the work of an instant, and soon Patricia is trotting merrily along the road to The Grange, with old Jenkins pounding in somewhat heavy fashion behind her.

When at length the wished-for massive iron gates are reached, and she has travelled all down the long and stately line of elms that in summer-time constitute the great glory of Mr. Bohun's avenue, and has brought forth a servant in answer to Jenkins' impatient summons, she asks eagerly:

"Mr. Bohun at home?"

"Yes, the master is at home just now; but in the

garden, or——If Miss Heriot will come in, there will be small difficulty in finding him," etc.

Patricia, springing from her saddle, gathers up her riding-skirt, thereby displaying the very dearest little pair of feet, and follows the footman across the quaint old hall to a closed door.

"In here, 'em; if you please, 'em," says that very gentlemanly person. "The libery, to *my* thinking, is the most comf'able room in the 'ouse. If you will be so kind as to sit down for a moment or two, I will inform the master of your arrival. But perhaps you'd prefer the dron'-room?"

No, Patricia would not. The "libery" is all she can desire. So the august one, with a polished inclination of his powdered head, proceeds solemnly to throw open the desired door.

Now on the mat outside this door sits a dog—a huge dog, a large and hungry-eyed dog—who fixes his glistening orbs upon Patricia, and moves his lantern jaws in greedy anticipation, and utters a savage growl. Patricia draws back. It is one thing to beard old Bohun in his den; another to beard his dog.

"Dear me!" she says feelingly, "what a very unpleasant animal! I don't remember seeing him before."

The footman, to show himself no doubt worthy of his title, lifts his aristocratic toe and sends that snarling dog to a considerable distance, where he lies cowed for the moment and growling to his heart's content. His conqueror meantime, turning to Patricia, reassures her with undiminished dignity:

"No fear, 'm," he says gracefully, in a tone redolent of the most perfect breeding. "No fear, I assure you 'm. He's Mr. Phil's dawg, and his bark is worse than his bite!"

Patricia, much impressed, enters the room, the door of which is speedily closed behind her. She is in a state of uncertainty as to who "Mr. Phil" may be, and is lost in wonder as to whether it is he or his "dawg" whose bark is of a character to out-Herod his bite. She naturally glances at the fire on entering; and, though in the act of advancing, now comes to a standstill. A quick crimson

flames into her cheeks, and involuntarily her teeth close on her under lip. This movement with a woman means "*Hush!*"

A bright fire is burning in the large old-fashioned brass grate that has hobs on either side of it, and before the fire, with a foot on either hob and a newspaper before his nose, sits a man—a young man with soft dark-brown hair and grey coat and no whiskers—a man most horribly unlike homely old Dick Bohun, or, for the matter of that, anyone else she has ever seen; and—which is unusual—a man who has taken no notice whatever of her entrance!

The room is a long one; the carpet of the thickest amongst its brethren, and of a most sound-disguising texture. It is evident to Patricia, after a moment's reflection, that the owner of the boots frying so peacefully upon the hobs has not heard the door either open or shut!

CHAPTER VIII.

“Strong reasons make strong actions.”

“The eloquent blood spoke in her cheeks.”

PATRICIA'S first idea is to beat a hasty retreat ; her second, to stand her ground.

“Who on earth can he be?” thinks she. “And what an uncomfortable situation ! A bachelor's establishment—a young woman without a chaperone (O Sandie!)—and a young man who has apparently descended from the clouds for my express discomfiture ! He will be safe to mention our strange meeting far and near. Well, *let him*. But, oh ! if papa should come to hear of it, *won't* there be somebody to pay, and no mistake ! However, as I am in for it, let me meet it with a spirit worthy of the cause.”

Instinctively she drops her skirt until her feet are hidden, and takes one step forward. But her soft footfall is unheard upon the soft carpet, to her intense disgust.

“Perhaps, after all,” thinks she, “his head is a swindle ! It may belong to an old, *old* man who will look upon me as a possible daughter. Some old men are wonderfully juvenile about the back. *This* horrid man may be like that.”

Thus fortified in thought, she coughs slightly, whereupon the brown head turns lazily in her direction, and the two handsome eyes in that brown head see her.

When this happens, laziness flies from him. He says :

“Bless my stars !”—nothing more—very distinctly, and, bringing his feet to the ground with a rather shocked haste, stands up before her in double-quick time. His newspaper is still in his hand, and (as far as Patricia can judge

who is very much frightened), he has the grace to blush a good deal. "I really beg your pardon," he says very humbly, looking down at her from his six honest feet of bone and muscle. "I had no idea there was anyone in the room except myself. What a barbarian you must deem me! Won't you come over to the fire and warm yourself? You must feel quite frozen over there."

Patricia hesitates. She is looking very shy, very flushed and warm from her ride—very confused, too, at the turn affairs have taken—and wholly pretty.

"Mr. Bohun?" she asks nervously, not looking up. Where is he?"

"Out, I'm afraid; but I'll make inquiries." He turns to the bell.

"So they told me," says Patricia, disconsolately, still with lowered lids. "I think, perhaps, it will be better for me to go, and leave a message, and trust to seeing him some other day."

"Oh, *no*! Pray do not go," says the young man with eager politeness. "He is quite certain to be in in a moment or two; and he will be immensely disappointed if he doesn't see you."

For a second Patricia's heart sinks within her. Does he know her, then, this strange young man? Is *he* conversant with her name and features, though she is so utterly ignorant of *his*? And will he betray this odd visit of hers to Mr. Bohun? Then, by the subtle instinct that often comes to our assistance, she *knows* he is quite in the dark as to everything connected with her, and that his involuntary remark is born of pure impulse. It amuses her now.

"Will he?" she asks, demurely. She casts a little lightning flash at him from her dark eyes, and then again the envious lashes catch the dewy orbs and drag them once more into bondage. "Are you sure?" she continues artlessly, her eyes directed to the carpet.

With her slender fingers she taps her habit in thoughtful fashion with her whip, and, indeed, there is a settled gravity about her whole demeanour not to be surpassed. Yet there is, too, a dainty mischievous line about her mobile lips, suggestive of the idea that laughter is not far from her.

"Quite sure!" returns the young man with emphasis; "so I hope you will wait for his return." He draws forward the low lounging-chair in which he had been taking his ease before her coming, and shakes up the cushions of it. "Do sit down," he entreats gently, "until Thomas finds him. And—and let me do something for you in the meantime, if I can." Then all at once, as though some happy inspiration has just come to him: "You will like your tea, won't you?"

"Ah, if I *might* have a cup of tea!" says Patricia, plaintively, softening quite magically beneath the effect of this welcome offer. "I am quite pining for one. It is such a tremendous ride from"—here she recollects herself, providentially in time, and comes to a dead pause; she turns crimson—"that is," she goes on in the direst confusion, "it is always a tremendous ride from everywhere. Eh?"

"Always," returns her companion, with just the faintest flicker of his lids. "I have ever found it so! You are sure you would not like this fan for your face? Coming out of the cold air into a warm room is very trying to one's complexion, is it not? I know nothing about it myself; but I've been told so. Thomas!" as the door opens, "tea! And have you seen Mr. Bohun?"

"Not yet, sir. 'Ave sent Giles after him, sir. Sure to fetch him in 'arf a mingit."

The dignified Thomas having made this speech, and shovelled some coals on the fire, retires.

All this has given Patricia time to recover herself. She now comes up to the hearthrug and sinks gracefully into the lounging-chair arranged for her with friendly haste, and, drawing off her long riding-gloves, drops them on the ground beside her.

"Who told you about our complexions?" asks she, for the first time lifting her eyes to smile at him openly.

"Books," returns he, promptly. He is evidently a very wise young man. "I am not sufficiently intimate with anyone to entitle me to a share in her confidence on such a question as *that*. But I don't suppose the fire will do you any harm. You are feeling quite comfortable?"

"As comfortable as I can be without Mr. Bohun. But I confess to you I shall be very disappointed if I have to go home without seeing him."

A touch of gravity has fallen into her tone.

"If he *should* fail you, can you not leave a message—a note?" asks he. "Can I do nothing?"

"Nothing, thank you. It is on business I wish to see him."

As she says this she becomes conscious that her companion is regarding her with politely suppressed curiosity. No doubt he is lost in wonder as to the business a girl like her can have to transact with old Dick Bohun.

She grows uneasy beneath his glance, which she imagines to be on her, long after it is really withdrawn.

Who on earth *is* he? And what a nuisance it is his being here to-day, of all others! She puzzles her brains to try and think of someone who might answer to the name of "Phil"—*anything*—but fails.

The most natural conclusion to come to is that he is one of the men stationed at Bigton—a small town situated some twelve miles or so from Egworth, where some cavalry are at present quartered. If he is one of the Bigton men, he will happily be quite ignorant of anything connected with Egworth (her own town), as few people, except on very rare occasions, trouble themselves to entertain the men at Bigton, finding those nearer home sufficient for their needs. Mr. Bohun, however, as she knows, is often in the habit of asking the men from the further barracks for a day's or a week's shooting, as the case might be.

If this man be one of these occasional visitors, this innocent little escapade on her part may by chance prove a very disagreeable affair. Stories in small country places travel with railroad speed, and certainly lose nothing in the travelling, whatever they may gain. Although personally unacquainted with her, or any of her family, he is probably in the habit of hearing their name mentioned once or twice a week in ordinary conversation with those in Bigton, and once he hears hers will at once understand who she is. And then, if he should chance to speak of

this *tête-à-tête*, as in all probability he may, what is to prevent the story spreading until it reaches her father's ears?

She knows well how seriously annoyed both he and her mother would be, should such a bit of gossip be retailed to them. It would mean a severe cross-examination until the whole truth was elicited, and Sandie's rather damning revelation be made common property.

This at all hazards must be prevented. She must conceal her name; keep this troublesome young man in good humour until the arrival of Mr. Bohun, and having cajoled that good old man in a private interview into keeping her secret, go home and pray devoutly that she and this good-look—yes, he *is* good-looking—person may never come face to face again.

She finds, too, deep joy in the thought that the regiment at Bigton is ordered for foreign service, and leaves that dreary town within the ensuing fortnight. There is, now that she has come to this point in her calculations, but one cause for regret, and that is, that it didn't sail during the fortnight past!

"I'm so glad you are really resting after your long ride," murmurs a pleasant voice at her elbow, breaking in upon her reveries. It is full of an intense concern that is, perhaps, a little purposely exaggerated, and at all events reminds her carelessly that she has been singularly silent for some time. "Ah! here comes tea. Now, Don, old man, this is no place for you. Out you go!"

Patricia, turning, sees he is addressing the unfriendly brute who had all but barred her passage a while since to the room. Oh, how she wishes now he had done it more effectually!

"What a savage creature!" she says, when the door is again closed and Thomas has left them, after drawing before her a little Chippendale table made dainty with Sèvres china, and a quaint old tea-service of a date unknown, and little steaming cakes in a snowy napkin. "He looks as if he wanted to devour somebody," she goes on, laughing. "How can you keep him?"

"How do you know I do keep him?" asks he amused.

"I made my discovery through Thomas. He and I marched boldly up to this door only to find your Cerberus in occupation of the mat. He growled: I retired. Thomas came to the rescue. 'No fear, 'm,' he said; 'it's only Mr. Phil's dog!' That didn't convince me of his mildness, but it told me your name," here she leans a little forward and looks at him frankly. "Mr. Phil—that is you; isn't it?"

"Yes, that is my name," returns the young man, smiling.

Patricia smiles back at him, and he, unconsciously led on by the friendliness of her eyes, says softly:

"*And yours?*"

There is a dead pause. Patricia, who at heart is supremely truthful, now finds herself compelled to utter a deliberate falsehood, or else betray herself and her brother. For a moment the vague thought of confessing all to this man, and throwing herself on his good nature, occurs to her; but from this course—he being so entirely a stranger—her soul revolts. No! Even the deliberate falsehood will be better! She racks her brain for a name to give him in place of her own:

"Maudsley?" No; he may be acquainted with them; "Darnley?" There are Darnleys some miles away—cousins of old Bohun's; and if anybody *should* hear of this day's adventure it will not surprise them that he should receive a morning visit from such near relatives. Yes, "Darnley" it shall be.

She grows painfully red, hesitates still, and then is lost. Her Rubicon is passed!

"Darnley!" she says, in a low quavering voice.

"*Darnley!*" repeats "Mr. Phil," with unmistakable surprise. And when he has said it again he stops short to stare at Patricia, in a manner suggestive of the most open and extravagant amazement.

But she, with her eyes bent upon the delicate old china, misses the expression in his, and only hears the somewhat questioning tone of his voice.

"Yes; Darnley," she declares, for the second time.

She says it quite distinctly now, and with quite an air.

It is astonishing how simple a thing it is to lie if you give yourself just a little practice. Her companion moves a small gimcrack upon the mantelpiece to and fro meditatively.

"Of Dering?" he asks pleasantly.

A spoon drops from Patricia's hand. With a little clatter it rings upon the silver tray. *Ah!* suppose the Darnleys of Dering should be known to this hateful young man? A little shiver renders frozen the spine of the younger Miss Heriot as this agonising thought runs through her brain. Bah! in a moment it is cast out again. A man quartered at Bigton may know the names of the county, but can't be on speaking terms with the whole of it; and Dering, if a mile, is thirty from Bigton. Poor creature! he is *young*, and wants to profess a knowledge to which he is not entitled.

"Yes," she answers with dignity, and looks up to mark the effect of this assertion.

The astonishment she sees on his face throws astonishment into her own. With the surprise on his is mingled a little amusement, and for a full minute he seems quite incapable of removing his eyes from hers. Then he rouses himself, and dropping into an easy-chair, draws it up close to the table, and smiles at her friendlywise across the cakes and the china.

"Do you like hot cakes? I do," he remarks, as though Darnleys and Dering are unknown.

("How artful!" says Patricia to herself. "He saw the game was up—that I had found out he knew nothing of the Darnleys, so sees fit to change the conversation; but *I'll* circumvent him.")

"You have been at Dering, perhaps?" she asks, sweetly, letting a lump of sugar fall with a tinkling sound into her own cup.

"Well, I—I've seen it," returns the young man somewhat confusedly.

"Ah! you know my sister?" goes on Patricia, now entering fully into the fun of the thing, and beginning quite to enjoy herself. Yes, she will punish him!

"No," replies he, with startling promptness, and just for one moment he lifts his head and looks at her.

"I thought, perhaps, you might have met her somewhere," says Patricia. "As for me, I am seldom at Dering"—here she smiles, the sly little puss—"but my—Miss Darnley is always there. You are sure you haven't met her? I fancied, from what you said a moment since, that you might perhaps be acquainted with her or Mr. Darnley—my father, you know." She leans back in her chair, and a little rippling laugh breaks from her.

"I! Ah! No! one meets so many people. Is your sister pretty?" stammers her companion very shamefacedly; yet through all his apparent discomfort there is still apparent the most unmitigated surprise.

"Lovely!" cries Patricia, with the utmost enthusiasm, thinking of Imogen.

Then all at once she remembers the swarthy skin and somewhat substantial features of Penelope Darnley, and collapses into an eloquent silence.

"Ah! then it seems I have missed something. No; I have never seen the Miss Darnley of whom *you* speak."

Is there the faintest possible emphasis on the pronoun? If so, Patricia, who is still busy with her tea-tray, and is looking full at him now with the sugar-tongs suspended in mid-air, perceives it not.

"Sugar?" she asks, more genially than she has as yet spoken to him.

"Yes; *lots*," says he.

"Greedy," says she; and forthwith drops from two to three or four lumps into his cup. "I should think your spoon would stand in it if I put any more," she exclaims, smiling gaily.

Poor fellow, his punishment has lasted now quite long enough, and so she'll let him off for the rest of the day!

When they have eaten most of the cakes (they are both young), and have got through a good deal more of the tea than is good for them, the strange young man grows confidential. He stoops across to her.

"Just like Darby and Joan, isn't it?" he says, with a beaming smile.

"What?" demands Patricia stonily.

The beaming smile sinks into the happy past: gloom takes its place.

"Why our taking tea together, *tête-à-tête*, he says in an injured tone, thereby making matters ten times worse.

"*Tête-à-tête!*" Darby and Joan." Good gracious, into what a situation one may sink! What *insults* one may have to endure, all for the sake of a most unworthy brother!

"I don't know who your acquaintances may be," says Patricia, alluding to the Darby and Joan part of his speech, with ill-suppressed wrath, and wilfully ignoring all memory of the notable couple in question. "Their names do not say much for them. But I think it is distinctly wrong of you to——"

"There is nothing wrong about it," interrupts the young man in grey, rising angrily to his feet; "nothing whatever. I don't know why you should accuse me of such a thing? The—the people I mentioned were married. They were, in fact, the most married people I ever heard of. All the world knows of them; and as for——"

"Well, it doesn't signify," cries Patricia, rising in turn to *her* feet, and confronting him with an undaunted courage. "We aren't married, are we? And to compare me to a "*Joan*"—when I *wasn't* one—and to compare me indeed to anyone like that, meant that you thought I shouldn't have been here, with you—alone!"

"It didn't. Upon my soul, it didn't. You misjudge me cruelly," cries the young man, growing rather pale. "I would apologise to you for having made that unlucky remark, only," proudly, "that I know there is nothing to apologise for. You must believe me or not, as you please, but that is the truth."

Patricia turns petulantly aside. She picks up her gloves herself, and draws them on her hands with a passionate haste.

"Mr. Bohun is plainly not to be found to-day," she says coldly. "I shall not wait any longer. An hour is too long already to have wasted!"

"It has been only forty minutes," says "Mr. Phil," with offended correction. No one is openly delighted at being

told that forty minutes of their society is rather more than can be comfortably endured!

"Only that!" exclaims Patricia wilfully. And just at this propitious moment the astute Thomas opens the door.

"The master is just comin' across the lawn now, 'm," he says. "Thought I'd let you know, 'm, after your waiting so long."

"Very good. I shall go and meet him," returns Patricia hastily, anxious to avoid the inevitable "naming of names" that must follow on an introduction to this troublesome stranger. "Let Mr. Bohun know that I am coming."

She gathers up her riding-skirt, arms herself with her whip in somewhat aggressive style, and, turning, makes to the young man in grey an extremely haughty little inclination.

He returns it in kind.

"Good morning," says Patricia icily.

"Good morning, Miss—Darnley," returns he steadily, with a scarcely perceptible smile.

He accompanies her to the door, opens it for her, and makes her a second salutation, that for grace and finish would not have disgraced the "magnificent" Louis himself.

"Well, if I saw much more of him there would be open war!" thinks Patricia to herself, as she crosses the long hall and hurries out of a glass side-door that leads into the plantations, and will take her the more quickly to Mr. Bohun.

"What an excessively unpleasant person!" she muses to herself as she goes. "Almost hateful—really!" It is to be presumed she is thinking of the "boy she has left behind her," and not of the inestimable Mr. Bohun. "If by any chance he *should* happen to be acquainted with the Darnleys after all, what a charming opinion he must have of me! Oh, *nonsense!* It is impossible—*quite!* If he did know them it would not be in human nature to resist betraying the knowledge, and enjoying for the moment my confusion, however lenient and excusing he might be afterwards."

Here she stops and clenches her little gloved hands vehemently.

"I think I see him being lenient to *me*!" she says, in a rather dreadful tone that, if heard by the "excessively unpleasant person," would have reduced him to order in no time, and checked for ever the fit of uproarious laughter in which he is at this moment indulging in the shady depths of the library. "But how curious he was! How he made me repeat my answers! I didn't like *that* in him. A *gossipy* young man is always to be despised. Perhaps, on the whole, I don't remember ever before meeting so aggressive, so"—here she grows a little vicious—"altogether detestable a person as he seemed. Thank goodness, he must sail with his regiment within the month. In that thought there is real comfort. But catch me mixing myself up with any fellow's gambling debts again, were he ten times my brother, once I get myself out of this fiasco, which has proved considerably more troublesome than I ever bargained for, and rather more than Sandie himself is worth. How oddly that stupid man stared at me. Very rude of him—*very* rude!"

CHAPTER IX.

"Anger is a transient hatred."

"Heaven in sunshine will requite the kind."

"Ah! how d'ye do, Mr. Bohun?"

She has come up with him by this time, and is now holding out her hand to the fresh handsome gentleman who is apparently so glad to see her. He is a tall man, well in the fifties, strong and athletic, and one of the richest commoners in England. The Grange is quite a show place in the county, and why the owner of it had never taken to himself a wife is a question often asked in Egworth, but never answered.

Had he loved and lost? Or wooed and ridden away unmindful of the tearful eyes that followed with passionate despair his gay defection? Or had he throughout all his young days escaped scatheless from the fire and bright eyes, and the allurements of the honeyed voices, that must here and there have called on him to stay?

There is not one who knows, in all the quiet little country-side in which he has elected to spend the latter part of his life. But when many years had died away, and he had died with them, one small thing came to light: some furniture in one of the Grange rooms being removed by the new owner, there was found behind his bed, sunk deep in the wall, a delicately framed picture, its face turned from the light. It proved to be a painting of a young girl. A fair, yellow-haired thing, exquisite of feature and lovely as a dream, who looked out from the canvas with great, soft, luring, blue eyes, and with red lips, ripe and fresh—a Greuze in colouring, but without the innocence of expression—a creature perfect in feature, but soulless and a little unholy!

Just below the portrait was written, in a man's hand, "Ætat. eighteen." But whether at that early period of her existence this blue-eyed beauty had died indeed, or died to him alone, no man knoweth.

"My dear child, I'm afraid I've kept you an unconscionable time," he exclaims. "But it wasn't my fault, believe me. Not that that takes a minute off the waiting; does it? Hadn't an idea you were here till a moment ago. Hurried all I could then. One of the men, in a frenzy of excitement, told me you had been waiting quite an hour."

"Scarcely that," says Patricia. "But I confess it felt like an eternity, because I was unhappy. I have something on my mind, Mr. Bohun," looking up at him wistfully. "I want to get it off."

"On to my shoulders, eh? Quite right; quite right. Little girls like you should carry no burdens. Old fellows like me are meant for them. Give me yours."

"Not here," looking nervously round her.

"Come into the library, then."

"Oh, not *there*!" with decision, thinking of the unpleasant "Mr. Phil."

"Why, what's the matter with the library? Who is there?" asks Mr. Bohun, surprised by her tone.

"Something — *nothing*!" cries Patricia, confusedly. ("Decidedly *nothing*—he isn't worth a thought!" she says to herself, a little viciously.)

"That dog again!" thinks Mr. Bohun, reflectively; "something *must* be done about it! I don't wonder you've taken a dislike to him," he says aloud to Patricia. "He's a horrid brute, isn't he?"

"He! A brute!" murmurs Patricia still thinking of her late companion. "That's a little severe, isn't it?"

"*Is* it, you mean? It's tremendously good of you to say even one word in his favour. He is universally detested in this house, I can tell you."

"Dear me, I shouldn't have thought he was as bad as that. Why on earth do you keep him, then?" asks Patricia, thinking how easy a thing it would be to transport him back to his barracks.

"That's the point," says Dick Bohun. "I'm thinking

seriously of getting rid of him, for once and all. I'm thinking"—sinking his voice to a solemn whisper—"of poisoning him!"

Patricia shrinks back from him, and grows decidedly pale.

"Poison him?" she breathes faintly.

"Decidedly, my dear. Like a *rat*! He's good for nothing. He cumberes the earth! Then why not dispose of him!"

Could anything more cruelly cold-blooded be imagined. Is *this* the kindly gentle friend to whom she has come with a view to relieving herself of her troubles? Is he mad? or only innately wicked? Patricia shudders.

"Oh, spare him!" she cries in faltering accents. "Do not do this thing! If you won't think of *him*, think of yourself! So many have done that sort of thing, and have always been discovered! You will be found out; I know you will."

"Not unless *you* betray me," says Mr. Bohun, thoughtfully. "To you alone I have confided my design. Will you betray me?"

There is an iron chair near her, and into it Patricia sinks, now completely overcome. If she doesn't promise entire secrecy, probably he will murder her too. Oh, horrible thought! Yes, she will promise anything; *anything*!—no matter what!

"Of course I won't betray you," she says, with a painful assumption of a dignified calmness. "For one thing, I have known you much longer than I have known him! No; be *assured* I won't betray you. But still, as your friend, I would entreat you to think of the consequences."

"*They* won't be much," declares Mr. Bohun airily. "Really the beast is of no account whatever. And the way I shall manage it, it will never be discovered. Remember, Patricia, you are my accomplice; you are the accessory before the deed!"

Patricia's pulses grow feeble. She leans back in her chair.

"Oh, poor young man!" she whispers miserably.

"Eh? You've met him, then?" exclaims Mr. Bohun with some surprise. "And you think he'll be sorry, eh?"

Wouldn't *you* be sorry? Would *I* like it!" cries Patricia tragically, clasping her hands.

"I shouldn't think anything of it. It's a mere trifle after all, says Dick Bohun, defending his infamous action stoutly.

"Oh, Mr. Bohun, but to die!—and by foul and murderous hands! Is death, then, 'a trifle,' do you think?"

"My dear, you exaggerate matters. It will be quite instantaneous, I swear to you. The dog won't feel it."

"I don't know why you should call him by such a name as that!" exclaims Patricia indignantly, her horror and disgust overcoming her sense of fear.

"You wouldn't call him a *cat*, would you?" asks old Bohun, laughing outright in a buoyant fashion that precludes all belief in a latent remorse.

"I'd call him a man!—a fellow-creature!—a being with a soul!" cries she, rising to her feet. Honest anger has brought a brilliant colour to her cheek, and a light to her eye!

It is now Dick Bohun's turn to betray amazement.

"What! accredit a half-bred bull-terrier with a soul! Call him a man and a brother! My dear child, your brain is upset, and it is all my fault. You are faint from want of food."

"I'm not," replies Patricia weakly. "I am only puzzled. Tell me who it is you are going to poison?"

"Why, Phil's abominable dog," says Mr. Bohun forcibly. "Who did you think it was?"

"*Phil!*" murmurs Patricia faintly, sinking back upon the chair.

For a few minutes the shrubberies to right and left of them resound with Mr. Bohun's laughter. "Long and loud laughs he." It seems to the ashamed Patricia as though his merriment will never have an end. At last, perforce, she joins in it.

"Oh! it is all very well," she cries at last, wiping her eyes. "But anyone would have thought it, let me tell you. And after all, what does it matter? People often make mistakes, don't they? *You've* made a mistake once or twice in your life, haven't you now?"

"I have indeed," acknowledges old Dick, still roaring with laughter.

"Well, Sandie has made a mistake now; and that's what I have come to see you about," declares Patricia, growing suddenly very solemn.

Whereupon Mr. Bohun followed suit. Seating himself besides her, he takes her hand in his.

"Now, what can I do for you?" he asks comfortably

"Ah, how difficult it is to explain!" returns she pathetically; "some things come slowly to the lips, and this is one of them." Here she pauses again, and feels that her courage is swiftly and surely ebbing away from her. "I am going to ask you something dreadful," she whispers at last in a tone that is just barely audible to him. "But," with trembling lips and downcast eyes, "you must try not to think too hardly of me on account of it."

"There is no need to try, my dear," says old Bohun tenderly. "I couldn't think hardly of your mother's child, if I tried."

"When I am twenty-four (which won't be a very, *very* long time," dismally), "I shall inherit, through some cousin of my mother's, £1,000. I want you to advance me now £340 of it."

She blushes crimson and hangs down her head.

Old Bohun laughs.

"Is that all?" asks he. "Why, I thought you were going to confess to half a dozen murders at least, or, at all events, to a poisoning, bad as my own contemplated one of a moment since. The one you found me out in, eh?" Here he chuckles again involuntarily at the remembrance of it; and then, at a second and later memory, pulls himself up rather short and looks quite grave.

"I must tell you all about it," says Patricia; and forthwith reveals to him her trouble: Sandie's evil behaviour; her father's ignorance of it, and his inability to find even so small a sum of ready money just now; and her own determination to come over to *him*, as the one person likely to help her in her perplexity.

When she has finished, she looks up wistfully at him out of her beautiful earnest eyes.

"I should not have come, perhaps?" she says with anxious questioning. "It was an unfeminine thing to do, and you will despise me for it?" Her voice fails her.

"Despise you! I consider you have done me a great honour!" exclaims he hotly. I feel proud and glad of it. To whom, indeed, would you come if not to your oldest friend. And Sandie mustn't be peached upon, mind that. Naughty boy! naughty boy! Did exactly what I did at his age, but *I* got a good horsewhipping for it from my governor. Eh, eh?"

"Oh! if papa should ever know!" begins Patricia, sadly. But he stops her.

"He never *shall* know. Tell you what, my dear. You come indoors with me now, and I'll write you out a cheque on the spot, and you can give it to the scapegrace with your love; and we will never tell anyone—you and I—one word about it!"

"Ah!" says Patricia. Her eyes fill with tears. Without premeditation, she flings her arm around his neck and kisses him warmly out of the divine gratitude of her heart.

"Why, that's a gift worth five times the money," says he, comically. "And so I'm not out of your debt after all. Remember what is due to you for your solitary confinement indoors during all the time I was idly meandering through my turnips."

"It wasn't altogether solitary," confesses Patricia, demurely. "Some one shared my lot."

"The dog?" asks he.

"The dog's master, I expect," returns she laughing.

"Eh!" says Mr. Bohun. For a moment he stares at her. "What, *Phil*?" asks he then, laughing too.

"Yes, that was his name. '*Mr. Phil*,' Thomas called him. I didn't hear his other name, but I felt instinctively he was one of those men from the Bigton barracks. A tall nondescript sort of person"—with an airy wave of her hand—"with an eye like a gimlet, and manners that left a good deal to be desired."

"Quite so, quite so!" says Mr. Bohun, instantly, who seems somewhat tickled by this description of his visitor.

"I knew you would agree with me," goes on Patricia,

who has not as yet quite forgiven 'Mr. Phil's' rather untranslatable smile as he bade her adieu. "I didn't think much of him myself. He is many things he ought not to be. But we waste time discussing him. The regiment now at Bigton is ordered to Ireland I hear, within the fortnight; so (as I *hope*) your friend and I are not likely to meet again."

"He is unfortunate in having fallen so utterly into your bad graces."

"His appreciation of his own graces will support him," returns Patricia, shrugging her shoulders; "and after all," magnanimously, "I dare say he is well enough in his own way (though it isn't a *nice* way;) but still he oughtn't to be inquisitive. In a man, that is a melancholy fault."

"I begin to feel distinctly ashamed of my—my visitor," says Mr. Bohun; "what did he say to you? Put you through your Catechism, eh?"

"Through the first part of it, certainly. He said in effect, 'What is your——'" She checks herself abruptly, and colours very generously. Then she moves somewhat closer to him:

"There is just one other little *wee* thing you can do for me," she whispers coaxingly. "*Will* you do it?"

"Anything!" returns old Dick, committing himself gallantly.

"Promise me, then, that you will never tell your friend my name!"

"I promise faithfully. But why, my dear?"

"Well, you see"—hesitating, and blushing, and twisting the button of his coat round and round between her fingers with a pretty confusion—"I—I didn't want him to know who I was. Riding out alone, you see, without saying anything to them at home; eh? I feared he might speak of meeting me here, to his brother-officers, and that it might then come to papa's ears, and so I should have to explain everything, and Sandie, in spite of my desire to hide him, would come to open grief after all. So I——" She breaks off abruptly and lowers her eyes to the ground. "All would have gone well," she continues at last, with a little burst of irritation, "but for that wretched young

man in there," pointing towards the library. "Would you believe it, he actually had the—the *audacity* to ask me who I was!"

"Say the word," says old Bohun, "and I'll have him flayed alive! Well?"

"Well, I was determined he shouldn't know my real name, so I told him I was one of the—Darnleys of Dering."

"One of the Darnleys of Dering? Ha! ha! *ha!*" roars he; "one of the Darnleys, eh? Ha? *ha!* HA!"

"Yes," regarding him with a certain gravity that savours of disapproval; "being one of the men stationed at Bigton, I knew he could not be acquainted with the Dering people. I was sorry to be obliged to do it; but he was mistaken enough to ask me the question outright, and what could I do?"

"What indeed!" says Mr. Bohun, who is now almost apoplectic with a mirth he tries in vain to subdue; "and which of them did you personate, Penelope or Matilda?"

"Matilda," says Patricia solemnly.

"Matilda! By Jove! *Ha!* HA! HA!" cries old Bohun, once more forgetful of his manners. He throws back his head and slaps his leg, and gives way to laughter undisguised.

Meanwhile Patricia—standing mutely before him—watches him with an unsmiling eye. What is the meaning of it all? What has she said or done to evoke such amusement in his breast? Wrath grows within her.

"Do you know," she says suddenly, turning to him with a suspicious sweetness in her tone, "I had no idea, until this moment, that the situation was so rich in humour. But forgive my dulness—where does the joke come in?"

"What!" says he, wiping his eyes, "and can't you see it?" This question on his part is only put to gain time.

"No," returns she slowly; *I cannot!*"

"What? Don't you see? Your being alone there together, and your saying you were Matilda, you know, eh? and—er——" Here he hopelessly flounders, and

goes down altogether beneath Patricia's gaze, which is directed full at him and never falters.

"It seems to me," she says with severity, "that *you* don't know, either, where that joke comes in. Not that it matters; only, I think it would have been a little more straightforward of you if you had said openly that you were laughing at *me*!

"Far be such a thing from me, my dear!" says old Bohun, suppressing the last twinkle in his eye.

"Well, never mind," returns she gaily, rising suddenly out of her small chagrin, and smiling at him with all the old geniality. "I must be going," she continues, tucking her arm into his.

"Well, come in first and get the cheque," suggests he.

At this her pretty face grows all aglow, and she hangs back a bit.

"Are you sure—*quite* sure—that I sha'n't meet that horrid young man?" she asks anxiously.

They are now at a spot that runs parallel with a thick laurel hedge, and a young man, walking leisurely along at the other side of it, on the soft mossy sward, hears her words distinctly.

"She is ungrateful," he murmurs to himself as he gets quickly out of further hearing. "There are many reasons why I should call her a horrid young woman, and yet I have not done so!"

He turns the corner, and is lost to sight. Patricia, being reassured by Mr. Bohun as to the impossibility of her coming once again face to face with her new *bête noir*, receives the little scrap of paper that will set her brother free from care and disgrace, and having most willingly bartered for it (as she believes) the greater part of the small inheritance coming to her, goes home rejoicing through the fast-gathering twilight.

Already dusk is on her. The God of Day, never too brilliant at this time of year, has sunk behind the hills in a red glory, and here and there the shadows are deepening as night draws on apace.

"Where is Miss Heriot?" she asks, as she springs from her horse at the hall door of The Chevies.

Miss Heriot had just gone down by the copse way towards Grant's Farm, to see Kate Dempsey, whose "man" was in trouble, the footman tells her; so nothing is left for Patricia but to wait patiently for her return to disclose her news.

CHAPTER X.

"The truly generous is the truly wise :
And he who loves not others, lives unblest."

"Tis better not to be, than be unhappy."

EVER and more quickly deepens the twilight. The short and sombre day has run its race, and now Death stares it openly. "The old age of day—the infancy of night" has come, and across its shadowy border-land Imogen Heriot walks with a light firm step, bound on her errand of mercy.

Her dainty furs clothe her round, and nestle closely to her throat. Upon her stately head a somewhat severe little cap sits lovingly. Her eyes, large and pensive, lifted every now and then from the frosty road she travels, seem soft and full of kindliness. There is a certain sense of enjoyment in the very freedom of her step, and occasionally her face grows into a more pronounced sweetness as her fingers tighten on the little purse she holds in her right hand. A very little purse, yet large enough to contain all the small moneys of which she stands possessed, although she is Miss Heriot of The Chevies! A purse destined to find its way into the hands of Mrs. Dempsey for the emancipation of "her man" from present trouble.

From time to time one may hear upon the chilly air the sound of a gun—sometimes nearer, sometimes farther, but always with a startling distinctness.

"They must be on their homeward way," she tells herself, quickening her steps. "I hope Patricia will be in to give them their tea. Ah! there again! 'Who'd be a

dog?" say some; but who would be a bird, say I, for at least nine months out of the twelve? Poor little wretches, how unhappy they must be to-day! How terrified by the invasion of a savage tribe into their quiet territories! And yet——" she checks herself abruptly and laughs a little. I *think* she was going to say, "And yet what a capital thing cold grouse is!" when the wickedness of such a thing occurred to her.

A yard or two more brings her to the cottage where she would be. Ten minutes suffice for the telling of her sympathy, and the offering of the contents of the pretty purse. Alas! they are not enough to redeem Mr. Dempsey from his trouble. It is a welcome help, but not the whole sum, and Imogen, pale and sorrowful, sinks upon a low chair, and ponders dismally upon the people she may or may not ask to help her and Mrs. Dempsey. Her charities up to this have been entirely confined to her own slender resources, and to have to *ask* for assistance for her poor is abominable to her. So she grows pale and silent, and very sad.

Into the midst of this sadness and perplexity comes a little child, who, creeping cautiously up to her, at last, emboldened by the lack of prevention, climbs into her arms.

Almost as he finds his way into this happy shelter, a young man, eager for a light for his pipe, finds his way to the cottage-door, and from that to the family sitting-room, where Imogen is sitting with the pretty three-year-old baby upon her knee.

Imogen! No longer the cold, unapproachable Imogen of his everyday life, but a tender, lovable Imogen, who is smiling down at the little boy, whose bare brown feet kick triumphantly and unforbidden amongst the fashionable bows and kiltings of her gown.

A tall woman, with dark blue eyes and reddish hair, is standing by the hearthstone. She is very pale, and her eyes are red with weeping. These sad eyes are turned on Imogen with a look in them of unutterable gratitude.

Felix Brown, crossing the threshold, advances nearer to them, and so attracts notice. He smiles at the sorrowful

woman of the house, stands his gun in a corner of the room, and holds out his hand to Miss Heriot.

"Good-morning," he says, smiling. "It seems late in the day for that salutation, doesn't it? But you will remember that we did not see you at breakfast."

"No." The tender smile has died from her lips, and once again the cold, unfriendly glance that seems reserved for him alone displays itself in her steady eyes. "My father was not going shooting this morning; I never care to attend an early breakfast unless he is there."

"I can quite understand," says Felix, who is not altogether displeased by this speech.

"Have you had good sport?" asks Miss Heriot presently, with all the air of one who feels that something *must* be said.

"Pretty well. I got separated from the others about twenty minutes ago, and, seeking them, stumbled on this cottage." Here he turns to the good woman of the house:

"To tell you the truth," he goes on with a very courteous friendliness, "I hoped you would give me a light, as my matches have somehow disappeared."

"Ye're welcome to anything I have, sir," replies the woman in a low melancholy voice, but with unmistakable hospitality. The extreme sadness of her look and tone strikes Felix. She is a handsome woman, with a soft Irish face and a brogue of the richest quality. Even as he watches her, struck by something peculiarly woeful in her expression, that expression changes as if by magic, and another one of maternal wrath takes its place. Her eyes have fallen upon her son and heir nestling in Imogen's arms.

"Patsey! ye thief o' the world, come out o' that!" exclaims she, indignantly. "Is it to spile the good lady's fine gown, ye would? Look at yer muddy feet, ye young blagguard, an' they lyin' widout a blush agin her ilegant skirt! Arrah, where were ye caught at all, that I can't dhrive a bit o' manners into ye! Come out o' that, I tell ye!"

"Oh no! *Please*, no," intercedes Imogen, earnestly, as she presses the boy's bonny saucy head against her breast.

"I like him to be here very much ; and he likes to *be* here. Don't you, Patsey ? "

Patsey makes no audible reply, but he casts a little, pretty impish smile at his mother over Imogen's protecting arm. He is a remarkably handsome child, dark and brilliant, and a little foreign in appearance, as many of the Southern Irish sometimes are.

"Ye're too good to him, yer honour," says the woman, in a rather wearied way. Her useless anger at an end, she has again remembered her present grief, and sorrow's wing has once more enfolded her in its sad embrace.

A tiny cry from the room upstairs, coming at this moment, mercifully diverts her attention for the second time from her troubles. In an instant all the motherhood within her is awake. She takes an involuntary step forward, then hesitates and glances at Imogen. Natural courtesy reminds her that her guests should be first in her mind.

"She's crying," she says to Imogen in a mysterious whisper, thereby throwing herself upon the other woman's mercy.

"Then go to her," entreats Imogen. "Patsey and I," smiling reassuringly, "will entertain Mr. Brown during your absence."

Mrs. Dempsey curtsies gratefully, and disappears up the winding ladder that leads to the room above, where her baby is crying.

Felix turns to Imogen :

"What is the matter with that poor woman ? " he asks. "Her face might haunt one, it is so replete with sadness. Is there," hesitating, "a secret connected with her sorrow, or might I know ? "

"It is too old a story to be a secret," says Miss Heriot gently ; and again the tender, sympathetic look grows within her eyes, and her lips take a sorrowful curve that adds tenfold to their beauty. "She is in sad distress, poor soul ! and through no fault of hers or her husband. He went surety some time since for a friend (a very false one), and when the money became due the friend was not to be found ; and now they must leave their little home, and

walk bare of hope and all worldly possessions in the cold world."

"But what is the sum? It cannot be anything so very great," says Felix, leaning forward with growing interest within his eyes.

"Not great to the few, but *very* great to the many," replies she with a faint smile. "It will make you laugh, perhaps, when I tell you that a hundred pounds would cover their debt; but that is as much to them as a fortune to other people. She was a maid of ours at one time," goes on Imogen hurriedly. "And—and we all were fond of her. I feel it very much. You must not think I did not try to do something; but I had so little of my own," paling perceptibly. "And there was nobody I could bring myself to ask to help me——"

"I am glad of that," says Felix gently, when she breaks off somewhat abruptly to bend her beautiful head above Patsey's curls, "very glad. Tell me, may *I* be the happy person to get this poor woman out of her difficulties?"

Imogen starts preceptibly, and lifts her eyes to his. All the blood dies from her cheeks, and

"Paler and sweeter than leaves that cover the blush of the bud" grows her face. About her lips there is a touch of compression.

"You must not do this thing because—because I have suggested it to you," she says hurriedly, scarcely knowing what interpretation may be placed upon her words.

"You are ungenerous!" returns the young man slowly. "I do this thing because it gives me a pleasure I seldom enjoy. I do it *solely*"—giving her back her own anxious glance very steadily—"to gratify a selfish longing of mine to be regarded as a comfort by somebody!"

In spite of his efforts to conceal everything from her, there is a certain amount of anguish in his eyes that will not be suppressed, and that betrays to her more than he knows.

Her white lids fall over her eyes.

"Indeed I wronged you," she says in a low tone, but very coldly. "Do what you can—what I *cannot* do—for this poor creature."

SHE turns away from him as she makes this apology, and gives all her attention, seemingly, to the child upon her knees. Somehow this small, curt neglect of his presence hurts him more than all that has gone before. He changes his position abruptly, and stares out of the window.

A long silence ensues. Then again—in a very low voice, and coldly still—she speaks. And what is there in her voice that suggests to him the idea that she is a little bit ashamed of herself?

“What is it you would do for her?” she asks gently.

“Far less than you can do,” exclaims he vehemently, facing her. “I can give her no tender words, no comforting assurance; I can only send her, to-night, a slip of paper that——”

“That will outweigh in her esteem all tender words of mine,” interrupts she with a half-smile. “Be comforted; you will do her more good with that small ‘slip of paper’ you mention than I could with a thousand protestations.” She pauses. “It is very good of you,” she finishes slowly.

The child, who has been fidgeting with the trinkets on her chain, now drags out her watch and drops it into her lap. Taking it up, her eyes fall upon the dial.

“*So* late!” she exclaims. “I must be going.”

At this moment Mrs. Dempsey re-enters the room.

“’Tis late, too, dear,” she says in her soft way. “The masther will be mad if ye’re late for dinner.” It is evident that she remembers acutely all the small touches of life that stirred her existence when in service at The Chevies. “An’ that child in yer arms all this time! Patsey, I’m tellin’ ye I’ll be even wid ye for it yet.”

“I have told you I like him; he is such a pretty boy!” says Imogen, sweetly.

But Patsey the ungrateful, careless of this sweet speech, has now raised himself upright on Miss Heriot’s knees, and seeing something attractive in Felix, or Felix’s belongings, is holding out his arms to him, and kicking vigorously to be taken.

Felix hesitates, glancing at Imogen, and laughing a little. As for her, she loosens her arms from round

the child, and a little sudden colour flames into her cheeks.

"Yes, take him," she says, "if he wishes it. You see he is changeable and fickle, like all the rest of his sex."

"A hard speech, is it not?" He leans forward as he speaks, and lifts the chubby boy upon his knee. With a little baby-cry of joy the child clutches eagerly at a small but jewelled pendant that hangs from his chain. It is a solitary ornament, and very insignificant, but the eyes of the young are sharp to see.

"After all, it isn't me," says Felix, laughing again, and glancing at her over the baby's head; "it is this foolish bauble."

"Nevertheless, he preferred *it* to me," returns she, smiling too. Then, rising to her feet, she looks first at Mrs. Dempsey and then, with a quick question in her eyes, at him. But Felix shakes his head. To be thanked openly is horrible to most men.

"Ah, well!" says Miss Heriot. Perhaps she is a little disappointed. To be able to lift a burden from another's shoulders is sweet to all good women. And now that imploring shake of his head forbids her to speak.

"Good-bye, Kate," she says, taking the woman's hand affectionately, "and do not be too downhearted. To-morrow—*to-morrow*," impressively, "I feel—I *know* will be a lucky day for you!"

"Yes, to-morrow," supplements Felix, glad to get off on such easy terms.

The woman, somewhat bewildered, glances from one to the other anxiously. Perhaps she gathers from their faces the hope they would inspire, because her own brightens marvellously, and her large eyes fill with tears.

"However it be, may the Holy Vargin bless you two!" she says solemnly. "Both in yer life an' in yer death!"

There is some intangible meaning in her tone that connects the two of whom she speaks. Felix grows a little pale, and a line that might be born of pain gathers round his sensitive lips.

Imogen looks at her kindly.

"A sweet prayer, Kate, for which I thank you," she

says, turning towards the door. But the woman, hurrying after her, lays her hand upon her arm.

"One minute, dear," she entreats. "Tell me now, is it thrue what I hear, that ye've given yerself to the young lord stayin' wid Mrs. Deverill?"

The words, though softly spoken, are, in the small room, distinctly audible to Felix.

"It may be," returns Imogen, with her slow, lovely smile. "More unlikely things have happened. But I have heard nothing about it."

Although her tone is so self-possessed, she cannot restrain the warm colour that rises, and crimsones her cheek; and seeing it, Felix, in spite of the comfort conveyed by her words, feels his heart sink within him. He places the little boy gently on the floor.

"May I come with you?" he asks Imogen, as she once more moves towards the entrance. And having received a polite, if cold, permission, he bids his whilom hostess a courteous adieu, and follows Imogen into the growing darkness of the mystic night. The child, running after them, holds out his arms, not to Imogen, but to Felix—a little glowing figure in the gathering twilight. Felix kisses him, and so does Miss Heriot; but there is something in her face, as she rises from the embrace, that Felix cannot read.

"You see, you really did conquer," she says, as they once more proceed homewards. "Those words of mine, if *hard*," as you called them, were just."

"Perhaps so. But surely they apply to women more than to men."

"The greatest student of human nature the world ever saw does not agree with you. What does Shakespeare say? Have you forgotten?"

"O Heaven! Were man
But constant, he were perfect; that one error
Fills him with faults."

"A gentle judgment!" protests Felix lightly. "*One* error! Is that all that can be laid to our charge?"

"But *such* a one! It 'fills you with faults!'"

"Now you are playing with your quotation—making

what was a general accusation into a more particular one. In one moment you change the offensive 'him' into the unkindly 'you'! Is *that* just? Besides, you wrong me?" He looks up from the frosty road (where already the sudden moonlight is throwing its brilliant rays, transforming all things beneath its touch into molten silver) into her pale, motionless, but most perfect face. He looks, but no glance from her is gained. She walks steadily onwards, as though he, and the heart within him beating so madly for her sake, are as dead to her as the autumn leaves beneath her feet.

He chokes back a passionate word or two, and once again, after a slight struggle with nature, which is always troublesome, he speaks with an admirable calmness.

"There are no two souls alike in all this world," he remarks in a low tone. When you spoke of fickleness you did not understand. Of myself so much I know, that if the love I covet were given me, I would be true to it through time and through eternity!"

Imogen makes no reply. Although now the stars are high in the heavens, he cannot see her face, which is partially turned from him. Daylight, loth to depart, still lingers, but Night's train is showing in the grey-blue sky.

"About their strength all men are conceited," returns Miss Heriot at last. "Now you believe what you have said, no doubt. But your love once gained——"

"I shall never gain her," interrupts he steadily.

"Ah! Then she is a reality!" says Imogen lightly. "Why be so downhearted about her? 'Faint heart,' you know, should not be encouraged: it is herald to the very direst misfortunes. Without any trouble you won Patsey's heart to-night: why should you not win hers?"

The cruelty of it all strikes Felix as so unique that he laughs aloud—a laugh, however, better unheard.

"As I won Patsey's?" he asks, looking at her with an almost open anger, "with a trinket? With my gold? Oh no!"

He sighs deeply as his short-lived resentment dies, and turns away from her. Greyer and greyer grows the dying daylight: brighter and brighter shine the stars above. A

mist from the far distant ocean, rising suddenly, sweeps indolently over hill and vale. Vaguely, sorrowfully, every now and then one may hear the breakers, as they crash against the worn rocks upon the beach below. The birds have ceased their sad winter chirpings and have gone to rest. The very streamlets—as yet only half frozen—are voiceless, disconsolate !

“How calm a silence steals upon the earth;
A reverent hush of nature's sounds, as though
God, walking in vast solitudes of thought,
Went by.”

For a long half-mile no word is spoken, but when they have almost reached The Chevies Miss Heriot breaks the silence.

“After all, you did not make use of that light for which you craved,” she says, speaking with an effort.

“A light I never got, by the way,” returns he. “I have a most unhappy memory ; so short at one time, so cruelly long at another.”

“I fancied men never forgot anything that tended to their comfort,” remarks she somewhat cynically.

“Sometimes,” returns he coldly, “their innate selfishness is vanquished by a heart-wound too deep to be overcome.”

“You allude to very rare cases.”

“Not so rare, perhaps, as you imagine. Memory, so long as they live, is to most people a curse.”

“You speak as though you had something you would forget,” says Miss Heriot, facing him abruptly. Her lips are pale, and there is a curious light in her eyes that to him is unfathomable.

“No ; nothing,” replies he, after a moment's thought ; “though my memory makes my pain, still I would not forget.”

“It is strange,” she says, in a low tone, “yet you compel me to think that——”

“That remembrance with me is bitter ? It is true ; yet my list of grievances is small. I bear with me only the memory of unkind words and looks, rather than deeds.

Still, the cruellest blow that fortune could deal me would be less hurtful than they are."

"It is cold," exclaims Imogen, in a faint shivering tone. She moves her head uneasily, as though trying to nestle more closely into her furs. A keen wind from the east blows straight across their path.

"It is too late for you to be out at this time of year," says Felix gravely; "but five minutes more will bring you to the house."

This is the last word that passes between them until, coming to the end of the long avenue of the Chevies, they see before them the glimmering lights in the windows, and the flickering shadows through the open hall-door that speak of glowing fires and warmth within.

Felix, stopping abruptly before they reach the stone steps, lay his hand upon her arm.

"Tell me!" he says a little hoarsely. "What that woman said about—about your going to be married to Lord Clanbrassil—it was a lie?"

Miss Heriot, drawing back, releases her arm from his grasp.

"You heard me deny it," she replies in a low haughty tone, and, brushing past him, enters the house.

CHAPTER XI.

"Never was known a night of such distraction!"

"A kind of weight haags heavy at my heart."

"Love! thou art bitter!"

UPON the soft, perfumed air the sad rise and fall of the violins rests plaintively. The lights are trembling, and the distant plash of fountains falling musically into their marble basins steals now and again upon the senses.

Fans are waving to and fro, and light young hearts are beating; and sorrow and dull remorse and pale unsatisfied longing seem but as vague shadows that belong not to this brilliant, breathing world.

Patricia in white, without any ornaments, looks the very idealisation of girlhood. Sylvia Yelverton in maize satin looks beautiful. But Imogen, with her great steadfast eyes and her face that is "pale as a rose is," deadens all other beauty into mere nothingness.

One forgets how she is gowned when looking on her. What robe, what colour, is it that would *not* become her?

Felix Brown, watching her from a distant doorway, acknowledges this great charm of hers with a choking sensation in his throat that savours strongly of despair.

The much-desired first waltz has been given to Lord Clanbrassil, to the chagrin of many besides Felix. He, indeed, had not dared to aspire to it; as, ever since that last walk with her across the park, her manner to him had been more than usually reserved and frigid, and to-night she has, so far, steadily ignored his presence.

She is decidedly pale, and there is a little touch of languor about her that serves to heighten her charms.

Patricia, on the contrary, is in the very gayest spirits. The night is so far spent that it is quite three hours since first the band poured forth its strains.

Patricia, having sent her partner on some idle errand, is now smiling across the room at old Dick Bohun, when suddenly, in one moment as it were, the smile freezes on her lips and her colour fades.

Her eyes fix themselves on one particular spot, and as the spot draws nearer, so her courage ebbs and dies, and a feeling of the most intense misery takes possession of her. Alas! what spite has cruel Fortune for her, that *this* young man of all others should now approach her? Why—*why* is he not on board that useful steamer, speeding away with his regiment to the pleasantly distant India? Or, if some unkind accident had kept him home, why should he be *here*—at the Grange, of all places; or, if here, why should he have seen her of all people in so thick a crowd?

He is coming! He is quite close! Oh, if that old Dowager, who alone stands between them, would only fall upon him and exterminate him!

"How d'ye do, Miss Darnley?" says the young man, whose approach she has been dreading, with an amount of cheeriness about him that is positively loathsome.

"I——" begins Patricia, and then stops short. She is conscious of a feeling of thankfulness that her partner is not present to hear this address, but words are beyond her.

"You have not forgotten me?" asks her tormentor anxiously. Forgotten! Will she *ever* be able to forget that terrible afternoon in the library at The Grange? She would have given all the world to be able to say honestly that she had, but with his clear eyes fixed on hers, she finds she cannot do it.

"Forgotten, no!" she says. "I cannot forget that I believed you to be now upon the wide seas, and that——" she hesitates.

"And that you are sorry your belief is without foundation!" He laughs a little and glances at her.

Just at this moment Mr. Bohun comes up to them and touches Patricia's arm.

"Let me introduce you to my nephew, Philip Bohun," he says gently, moving away from them again, almost as the introduction is made.

Patricia, opening her fan, lays it against her lips and looks at the polished floor.

"I did not know your name was Bohun," she says at last.

"Or that I was your cousin?" continues he calmly. "The Darnleys and the Bohuns, you know, have claimed kindred with each other for generations."

Patricia, lowering the fan and lifting her eyes, meets his gaze imploringly.

"I hadn't an idea I had a cousin like *you*," continues the young man confidentially. "It is a pleasant surprise. I like the thought that I may call you 'Patricia' just whenever I choose."

A rich colour grows upon the cheeks of the younger Miss Heriot, and, all suddenly, her dark eyes fill with tears.

"*Don't!*" she says in a low tone. "It--it is very shabby of you!"

At this Bohun colours too.

"It is!" he declares eagerly; "and I beg your pardon for it, and I'll never do it any more. So there! But it *was* a temptation, when you insisted on being my cousin. Miss Heriot, do not throw me out of your good graces altogether because of our unfortunate first meeting. Be generous enough to remember that it was not *my* fault that we did not meet otherwise. And—and though it wasn't my fault," says he humbly, "I wish you would say *now* that you forgive me."

"I do," murmurs Patricia softly. She turns a bangle round and round upon her arm, and then again looks at him. "Don't tell papa," she whispers hurriedly.

"Is thy servant a dog?" exclaims Bohun. "I shall tell no one: I don't want to. I shall treasure that first meeting of ours—though *you* hate it," reproachfully—"as a pleasant remembrance for ever."

"I don't exactly *hate* it," protests Patricia shyly. "Only——"

As she hesitates about the finishing of her sentence, she happens to catch his eye, and then all at once—they hardly know why—they both burst out laughing. It is a really good healthful laugh that brings them to a foundation.

“That’s better, isn’t it?” says Patricia saucily. “There is nothing like a good laugh. I don’t feel half so much ashamed of myself now! But—I’m glad it’s over.”

“What—your laughter?”

“No; the discovery! It has weighed upon my conscience ever since. I couldn’t forgive myself for telling you I was Penelope Darnley.”

“No wonder!” replies Bohun solemnly, glancing expressively across the room to where the real and original Penelope is desecrating the wall in the full flower of her her age and ugliness.

Again Patricia laughs, and he, drawing her programme from her hand, opens it.

“Ah, here is my partner!” says Patricia, beaming upon the gallant plunger, who is fighting his way towards her through the indignant dowagers.

“One moment!” entreats Bohun, hurriedly, making the most of his time. “The next is engaged; but the seventh—may I have that?—and the ninth?—and the——”

“And don’t you think that will do?” asks she mischievously.

Already the plunder is at hand, and she turns upon him a look of welcome that brings down upon his innocent head a mental anathema from Bohun that should have withered him.

Turning aside, Bohun crosses the room to where an open doorway may be gained. Anything is better than this heated atmosphere when the desire for waltzing is far from one. Stumbling up against Tom Heriot, who is leaning against the door-post, he apologises with a short laugh for his awkwardness, and passes on into the dimly lighted hall.

But from Tom Heriot he receives no recognition of his apology, that young man being apparently steeped in a flirtation with Miss Brown, who is looking a little more dowdy than usual, in a mustard-coloured gown. He is

smiling sweetly into her face, and telling her more lies than would fit into this record, whilst all the time his blood is mounting to boiling pitch, as he watches the scandalous encouragement Miss Yelverton is giving at the other side of the room to a—a—(word unmentionable)—fellow in the Guards! She is doing it so openly, too; right under the noses of the county! She might have had the decency to retire into the conservatory on her right, if that sort of thing is necessary to her happiness; but she is now, as ever, careless of the world's opinion—a girl without a heart, a studied coquette, etc.

He is frowning behind the smiles that Miss Brown so gladly believes to be for her alone, whilst Sylvia, from her distance, grows every moment more passionately jealous of those hypocritical beams. After all he has looked and hinted to *her* (Sylvia), how *dare* he so smile upon that miserable faded little creature? What! is *she* to be cast aside, even for an instant, by such a girl? Miss Yelverton grows positively brilliant, and makes an entire and hopeless conquest of her partner, whilst deciding, with compressed lips, that she will not move from the prominent position she has purposely chosen (evidently with the double intention of tormenting herself and enraging the man she loves) for anything this world can offer her!

So two hearts, in all that motley crowd at least, know passionate dissatisfaction. Sandie Heriot, watching them from afar, laughs a little to himself and shrugs his shoulders. Sandie, heart-whole and free, with the weight of his debts lifted—no matter how—from his shoulders, is enjoying himself to an unlimited degree, smiling with an indiscriminate gaiety into each new face, and accepting the joys of the present moment without thought or fear for the future, as it is his nature to do under all circumstances. He casts his smiles broadcast, and makes pretty speeches to prettier partners, even whilst amusing himself by studying Elinor Brown's transparent efforts to enslave his elder brother.

"A losing game, my pale Elinor," thinks he; "your trumps are hardly good enough."

The touch of mischief in his composition compels him

to enjoy her future sure defeat; yet a few minutes afterwards, seeing her alone and looking slightly dejected, the good in him comes to the surface, and giving up all hope of securing a more desirable partner, he lifts Miss Brown out of her slough of despond, and restores her once more to a sense of her own importance, by demanding from her the dance just then on the cards.

Thoroughly good-natured — and at the same time thoroughly unstable, Sandie Heriot is not to be depended upon, a great deal of utter worthlessness being mixed up with the brightness of his disposition. To-night, however, he has done for Elinor what, perhaps, a worthier man would have excused himself from doing, and she is grateful to him for it. It is not the pleasantest sensation in the world to find one's self sitting *solus* in a crowded ball-room, beneath the eyes of a more successful rival; and Miss Brown is deeply grateful, in that Sylvia Yelverton's grey orbs have not so beheld her.

Night wanes, and all the stars are growing dim. Through the windows and through the open door of the conservatories the ever-increasing pallor of the heavens becomes clear.

“Night! that great shadow and profile of day,”

is sinking fast; and already the chill mists, that speak of wintry morn, are sweeping across hill and dale.

Imogen, lounging idly amongst the flowers far from the ball-room, is slowly losing herself in curious thought, when a voice at her side rouses her.

She starts very naturally, and looks up at Felix Brown.

“You are alone; you are perhaps disengaged?” he says gently. “May I have the pleasure of this waltz?”

“You ask me in an evil hour,” returns she, smiling. “I have only this moment refused to fulfil my contract with my legitimate partner. I am afraid we parted on anything but the best of terms.”

“Naturally he was disappointed,” says Felix.

“Naturally he should have been grateful. To have to dance with a tired partner must be a subdued sort of purgatory.”

Her tone is so unusually soft and pliant that he drops into the seat near her, and taking up her fan, opens and shuts it dreamily.

"You hardly grasp it," he says. "To some people to—endure even torment in the society of those they like would be bliss."

"I hardly think Captain Bland is one of those exalted people," answers she, with a low, amused laugh; "He took his dismissal very resignedly. May I have my fan?"

She waves it indolently to and fro, as if half forgetful of his presence. She looks a little tired, and dark shadows lie beneath her eyes. Presently she glances at him again.

"How silent it is here!" she says. "One might almost forget the crowd, the turmoil, that is only a few yards from us when all is told. And you—you are silent too." Her tone is singularly sweet and low. "Have you enjoyed yourself?"

"Yes—no," returns he abstractedly.

She smiles.

"Which?" she asks again.

"No, then," declares Felix wearily. He throws out his arm with a gesture full of discomfort. "I sometimes wonder why I ever go to an affair of this kind. "I," impatiently, "certainly don't enjoy it; and the remembrance of it for days is a bore—a——"

"You grow old," interrupts she, closing her fan with a little sharp click. "In ten years more you will be afraid to say all that. As for me, I think still, that a dance is a pleasant thing for so long, but no longer. Just now I am tired of it. I would go home, but that Patricia is still so full of the moment's happiness. To see her, as I did ten minutes ago, so bright, so satisfied with her present hour, was a positive pleasure. I would not hurry her, so I came in here to rest."

"Do I disturb you?"

"No; hardly that!" she says wearily, sinking back in her lounge, in a rather exhausted attitude, and once more unfurling her fan. The boredom he spoke of a moment since is now full on her.

Felix rises to his feet. His movement, which is rather

abrupt, fails to attract her attention ; her eyes are lowered and the white lids lie upon them so far that their expression is concealed from him. The hand that waves the fan shows no faltering.

"Why didn't you tell me before that you wished to be alone?" demands he, with ill-suppressed anger, gazing down upon her frowningly.

She drops her fan upon her knees, and meets his wrathful glance with one of mild surprise that is largely mingled with indifference.

"It never occurred to me," she says slowly. "And, after all, I don't believe I did wish it. Do not go, *please*. If you like the quiet of this place, I would have you understand that it is quite the same thing to me whether you go or stay." Her glance has grown calmly persuasive. She beckons to the seat he has just vacated. "Pray do not go on my account!" she says again. "Your being here makes no difference to me at all."

Her politeness has reached a pitch. Evidently she has said all she means to say, and has already fallen back into the reverie from which he roused her.

Felix, watching her, feels a sense of bewilderment take possession of him, and a smothered exclamation, not altogether holy, escapes him. Yet he remains. Reseating himself, he gives himself up to a serious investigation of his own feelings.

He has indulged in this meagre luxury for about six or seven minutes when he becomes aware that Miss Heriot is speaking to him.

"Have you solved it?" she is asking in her soft mocking voice. "Of what were you thinking?"

"Of you," he returns shortly.

In a moment she has grown grave again, and a faintly offended expression shows itself upon her face.

"And of me—what?" demands she coldly.

"If I told you, it would not interest you."

"I can quite believe that: few things do."

"If it failed to interest, it might anger you."

She turns slightly towards him, and lets the flowers from her bouquet, with which she has been triflings, fall in a little scented heap upon her gown.

"What should there be in your thoughts to cause me anger?" she asks, with a slight touch of hateur. She draws up her beautiful slender throat, and looks at him through half-closed lids.

"The question is yours," he returns, with a disdainful shrug; "the answer is therefore due to you." He is now thoroughly roused, and there is a light in his eyes that should have warned her. "When you spoke to me a moment since, my thoughts had just arrived at the sure conclusion, that whatever rank and position might have to do with your future life, love would be permitted there—no place at all!"

Miss Heriot, with a little slow movement, sweeps the loose flowers from her gown, and brings herself to a standing position. The heavy white lids no longer conceal the eyes beneath, that now flash upon Felix a glance fuller of passion than he had believed them capable of showing. Her lips, though very white, are firm, and her delicate nostrils alone betray the emotion that is overpowering her.

"You give yourself much unnecessary trouble," she says in a low voice, quick with anger. "To analyse my character—to study my probable future—is not so much an impertinence as a waste of time on your part. It is, you should remember, a future that must of necessity be far remote from yours."

She turns from him. Felix, too, has risen to his feet, and would perhaps have spoken, but that at this moment Sandie enters the conservatory.

"Are, there you are!" cries he, seeing his sister. "In safe company," with a nod at Felix. "I've been looking for you everywhere. Patricia has confessed herself beaten at last, and the *mater* is bent on home. The carriage is waiting."

He gives his arm to Imogen, who has said nothing, and once again glances over his shoulder at Brown.

"You'll return with Tom and me in the dog-cart," he arranges genially, and then takes his sister away.

For many minutes after they have gone Felix never stirs. Bitter to an almost insupportable degree are the

thoughts that surge within him, Then at last he draws a long breath, and looks around him somewhat vacantly, as one might who is slowly awakening from a troubled dream. Upon the ground, almost at his feet, the crushed and dying flowers are lying that *she* had so ruthlessly cast from her. Amongst them a pale rosebud lies—a little forlorn creature, born surely out of due time. Its neck is bent, its petals tinged with death's decay.

Stooping, he lifts it from the ground. In a mad, sweet, but unthinking moment he presses it to his lips. Then memory returns. His face darkens. With a passionate movement, full of deepest self-scorn, he steps to the open doorway of the conservatory, and flings the already dying thing far out into the dim recesses of the night.

CHAPTER XII.

"There are chords in the human heart—strange varying strings—which are only struck by accident."

"Mine be the heart that can itself defend."

THERE is scarcely a word spoken by Imogen during her homeward drive. Lady Olivia, very contrary to her usual custom, had permitted the girls to stay to a late hour out of compliment to her old friend Richard Bohun, and now in consequence is thoroughly exhausted. Patricia, too, is singularly silent, so that Imogen's taciturnity is scarcely remarkable. The sky is growing very naked as they draw near home, and the cold chill touch of morning makes itself felt.

"Good-night, mamma," says Imogen, as they all three stand beneath the centre hall-lamp preparatory to seeking their rooms. Her tone is not drowsy—only a little abstracted, a little compressed.

"Good-night, darling. Now be sure you go to bed at once. How *tired* you look! You danced too much, perhaps. I wonder when those stupid boys will think it wisdom to come home?"

"'When daylight doth appear,'" quotes Patricia gaily. She might never have been to a ball at all, she looks so fresh and bright and joyous. She runs after Imogen, who is already ascending the stairs. "Give me a minute or two," she whispers eagerly, being big with her great discovery. "I couldn't tell you all the night; but *don't* lock your door for a little bit, and send Hatchett away."

"I'll see to it," returns Imogen, smiling wearily. "But don't be long, if you wish to find me sympathetic!"

She goes up the stairs listlessly, gets herself into her

white cachemire peignoir as quickly as possible, and, having dismissed her maid, waits impatiently for the coming of Patricia.

What is it she has to relate? What? A flirtation—a love affair? But with whom? That is the troubling wonder. If it should be George Deverill, well and good; or even Sir Roland Boyd, in spite of his forty years, in case she liked him. But that it should be—She lifts her hands to the sides of her head, and pushes back her loose hair, and stares illy at her haggard but lovely face in the long mirror before her.

That it should be *he*! She brings her teeth down upon her lower lip with a force that hurts, but is not heeded by her. By what right did he dare—*dare* to say to her what he had said an hour ago?

The intensity of her feeling dies from her. Anything that is extreme is never lasting. She sighs heavily, and turns away from the reflection of her image even as Patricia enters the room.

"You look like Lady Macbeth," says the latter lightly, advancing towards her, "with your white gown and that rapt expression on your face. Come to the fire; it makes one feel the cosiness and general deliciousness of life Well. It *was* a good evening, wasn't it?"

She has nestled herself into a snug little lounging-chair and looks up at Imogen enthusiastically.

"Was it?" returns Imogen. "It struck me as being exactly like all other balls—a mixture of bad dancing and time-worn compliments; a little sweetness, a little bitterness; no more."

"Then you didn't enjoy yourself?" asks Patricia in a very disappointed way.

"Yes, immensely; quite as much as ever I did. Do not misunderstand me. What can be more exhilarating, more soul-stirring, than to hear one's own praises sounded until long after midnight, all in the same drowsy tone?"

"Poor Lord Clanbrassil!" exclaims Patricia, breaking into a rich, clear laugh. "Bless me, what an unfortunate man he is! But if he bored you, ducky, why did you dance so much with him?"

"To see how much of him I could endure, perhaps ; to see how much idiotic nonsense I could put up with for one evening out of my life."

"But why—*why?*" demands Patricia, a little impatiently. "You are not a professed student of human nature, that you should sacrifice a whole good evening for such poor ends."

Miss Heriot laughs curiously, and clasps her white hands behind her head. The firelight, leaping up, shows how pale is her face, how brilliant her eyes, how white her lips.

"Have you forgotten," she asks, "how poor we are, in spite of—or rather *because* of the appearance we make? We have not the courage to retrench ; it is not in us. And—and can't you imagine, without my telling you"—she tightens the grasp of one hand upon the other, and her lips grow dry, and her words come from her with difficulty—"how excellent a thing it would be—for *us all*—if Clanbrassil should be graciously pleased to lay at my feet his hand and—fortune?"

Patricia, rising suddenly, unclasps Imogen's fingers, which are tightly clenched, and drawing them down from behind her head, holds them firmly.

"Don't talk like that to *me!*" she says a little sharply.

"But why?" persists Imogen, smiling. There is no colour in her face, and her smile is as sad as a tear. "Why should I not by one word lift you all from a wearing anxiety to where you would be? And then, besides"—with a little mocking laugh—"just think what it would be to us to have a really solvent person as son-in-law, brother-in-law, husband! Consider the intoxicating rapture it would be to me to sit opposite to him at breakfast, and pour out his tea until death us did part!"

"Oh, Imogen!" murmurs the younger girl sadly. There is a world of reproach and horror in her tone. "A title is all very well," she goes on presently, "but it doesn't make up for many things. And *you* would be the last girl in the world to sell yourself to any man."

"The *very* last, I used to think. But circumstances grow too much for me."

"You are tired," murmurs Patricia, very softly, kissing

her cheek. "Let us talk of something else. How could you say the dancing was bad? I never had so many really enjoyable partners; and for one, Felix Brown, let me tell you, dances like an angel."

"Does he? I didn't dance with him," coldly.

"Not even *once*!"

"Not once."

"Dearest, how unkind!"

"Why unkind? Why do you take his part?" asks Imogen, lifting herself suddenly from her lounging position and looking keenly at Patricia.

"I don't know," returns Patricia, a little shyly. Then she lifts her eyes to her sister's. "After all, it *is* hard for him," she says.

"Do you wish me to be civil to him?" asks Imogen, with an effort. "If so, you should have said so sooner."

"But of course I would not speak. I—it would not be of any use your being civil to him because of *me*!" she goes on, confusedly. And then impulsively, "Dear Imogen, I *wish* you would like him!"

Miss Heriot disengages her hand from her sister's and makes a vague attempt at arranging her already faultless gown.

"If the necessity for it has arisen," she says carefully, "I dare say I shall be able to be as civil to him as even you can desire. But I was not told—I did not know——"

"Then he did not tell you to-night?—all the time you were in the conservatory together? Why, I waited on purpose!" declares Patricia, a note of distinct grievance in her tone.

"What should he tell me?"

"Why, that he loved you, of course!" exclaims the younger Miss Heriot indignantly.

Imogen, pushing back her chair, stands erect upon the hearthrug and looks down upon her sister.

"Loved—*me*! Are you mad?" she says.

"Not so mad as you, if you can't see it!" Patricia has risen too. "Oh, Imogen! if there is hope for him, show it!"

"Imagination has made you its prey!" replies Miss Heriot icily. "But, believe me, even should this absurd idea of yours possess any truth, it would be so much the worse for Mr. Brown. I could give him no hope—*none!*"

"Not now, perhaps—but——"

"Not now—or ever!"

"It is incomprehensible," cries Patricia, throwing out her hands with a little peculiar gesture, "that you should entertain for him such a settled aversion. He is clever, accomplished, charming altogether, yet withal so quiet that one fails to discover his superiority until he has left one. He is not overpowering: he does not make one feel small."

"How you have studied him!" says Miss Heriot, with a rather suppressed sarcasm.

"Sufficiently to know he is entirely above the heads of most other men we meet. Now, for example, who would compare him with Clanbrassil?"

"I don't know, I'm sure. *I* haven't!" returns her sister with a curious smile. "Have you?"

"Repeatedly," with some emphasis. "One is by hazard an earl; the other is a *man!*"

"Oh, poor Lord Clanbrassil!" murmurs Imogen, copying Patricia's tone and words of a few minutes since. She leans back in her chair and laughs aloud.

"Well, *isn't* he insipid? A creature who dreams of nothing, I verily believe, from morning to night, except his horses and the correct treatment of his pug. Now Felix, on the contrary, has many high aspirations. He can actually forget his cattle at times, and though quite as much up in horse-flesh as Clanbrassil, has at least the good-breeding to suppress his knowledge in the drawing-room."

"If you come to breeding," says Miss Heriot slowly, "as applied to Mr. Brown, time is 'your tedious song should here have ending.'"

"You are severe," remarks Patricia, rather severely herself.

"You forced me to it. What a partisan you are!"

"I can't help it at times. And do you know, much as

I opposed their coming at first, I do now heartily like *all* the Browns, except perhaps Elinor. As for Felix, I am his very good friend from henceforth."

"He should count himself fortunate. But surely it was not to sing his praises you came here so late. There is something ~~in~~ the subject, no doubt, but I do not find it sufficiently interesting to watch for dawn over it. There was something else—something more actually personal—"

She hesitates, watching Patricia for the second time keenly.

Patricia colours, and smiles as though involuntarily.

"You are right," she says. "It is such an absurd thing, and will make you laugh. You remember that visit of mine on Sandie's account to Mr. Bohun some time ago, and my meeting with a singularly and very oppressively curious young man?"

Imogen nods.

"Well, he was there to-night. I positively danced with him!"

Miss Heriot is sufficiently interested to raise herself, tired as she is, into a sitting posture.

"Patricia!" she exclaims, in a tone of the most satisfactory amazement.

"Yes, I assure you," declares Patricia, delighted with the sensation she has so clearly produced. "And who do you think he has proved himself to be?" Allowing for a pause meant to be filled with huge notes of exclamation, she finishes her speech. "He is Mr. Bohun's nephew, and an intimate friend and cousin of *the Darnleys*!"

Imogen has now clasped her arms round her knees, and her lips have begun to widen.

"*What* a situation!" she says.

"You may say that! When I saw him approaching, I fancy I got as near as fainting as I shall ever get. When he was quite close he said, 'How d'y'e do, Miss Darnley?'"

She leans back in her chair, as though overcome by the recollection, and gives way to unrestrained mirth. "Penelope was within a yard or two of me. Did you see *her*—her gown—her ringlets?"

‘Well?’ asks Imogen breathlessly.

‘Well, that was all. It was a little mean of him, wasn’t it, considering he *knew*, to carry things so far? But I gave him his scolding for it, and now I have forgiven him. I dare say it was irresistible. Did you notice him?’

‘I remember one man I saw you dancing with—an exceptionally tall young man. Was it he?’

‘Your description is very vivid—yet still——’

‘Pah! I should say more. Well, then, the man I mean had a nose!’

‘I blush for my stupidity! I am always afraid, do you know, of late that it will grow upon me. Even that last graphic touch does not tell me anything. Yet I think—I am almost *sure* indeed—that Mr. Bohun had a nose!’

‘I tell you it was a nose to remember—a hooky Wellington sort of a nose, only, if possible, a degree more pronounced than the Duke’s. And, besides——’

‘Certainly not’ contradicts Patricia indignantly. ‘He has a nose just like everybody else, and not a bit like that horrid old man’s. You couldn’t have seen him at all. Yet he danced beautifully. “You might”—reproachfully—“have noticed that. Not like some people, who seem to me to ask one to tread a measure with a view to getting a dancing-lesson without having to pay for it.”’

‘A disgracefully low transaction!’ protests Imogen, laughing again, ‘as, after all, it can’t be had for nothing. If *he* doesn’t pay for it, his unhappy partner does.’

‘We are agreed on one point, at all events,’ says Patricia gaily. She springs to her feet. ‘Good-night, good-morning, good-day!’ she cries, flinging her arms round her sister. ‘Which is it now? I seem to have lost all sense of time.’

‘If you didn’t lose more than that, you need not complain,’ returns Imogen, with a swift glance.

Patricia’s colour deepens.

‘Go to bed, to sleep. You look pale and wan,’ she cries, hurriedly. ‘Good-night.’

‘Good-night, darling!’ says Imogen, clinging to her, and kissing her with a rapid, unexpected warmth.

In the meantime Sir Hugh and Lady Caroline have been lightly touching upon topics not altogether dissimilar.

"I always thought so," says Sir Hugh; "but——"

"I didn't. I felt sure it was Patricia. It is now declared, at all events. Cannot be mistaken. He is very devotedly in love with Imogen."

"Well, nothing could be better."

"Nothing could be worse, you mean."

"Worse?"

"Yes. She will certainly refuse him."

"In the name of patience, for what?" demands Sir Hugh, explosively. "Is it because he is rich, handsome, prosperous?"

"No. Merely because his father sold cotton, and that he himself is of no family whatsoever."

"Pshaw!" exclaims Sir Hugh. He strides up and down the room once or twice in a rather disturbed way. "Look here, Olivia," he says at last, pausing opposite his wife, and speaking in a curious, strained sort of way, "one can't shut one's eyes to a thing for ever. My affairs have arrived at such a strain that now something must be done, if starvation is to be kept from the door. I don't want to frighten you needlessly. I have kept the greater part of my troubles back from you from time to time, so as to lessen your anxiety, but I can no longer conceal from you that I am placed in a very critical position. Bolton told me so, in as many words, yesterday. He said I could not expect to weather the storm much longer without help; that I had not, in fact, a leg to stand on!—his own words, I assure you—and that money must be got somehow, and so on."

"Oh, do try and get it, dear!" entreats poor Lady Olivia, who is now too nervous to be sensible.

"But where the deuce am I to get it? You don't suppose that ready money grows on every bush! And every method of procuring it that I know of has been used up long ago. I see nothing but absolute ruin staring us in the face; yet here is this wilful girl deliberately throwing away fifty thousand a year without a compunction."

By this time Sir Hugh has worked himself up into quite

a storm of excitement, and is marching up and down the room with his hands locked beneath his coat-tails.

As for Lady Olivia, she has subsided into silent tears.

"Well, well, there is no use in anticipating evils," continues Sir Hugh presently, agreeably oblivious of the fact that he has gone far past the anticipatory stage.

Having succeeded in raising the hurricane, he is now equally desirous of laying it.

"Perhaps! Who knows?" says he. "Things may brighten."

"If she would even encourage Clanbrassil!" murmurs Lady Olivia, who is still in the depths of woe.

"Ay! just so! But how she could throw over Brown for such a heavy substitute is more than I can imagine. For my part, I should prefer Felix, with no antecedents, to Clanbrassil, with all his ancestors."

"So should I," says the wife; "but," says the mother, "we cannot all think alike, my dear, and you and I are not girls."

This last is so incontestably true that Sir Hugh refuses to reply to it.

"Clanbrassil's rent-roll is barely twenty thousand a year," he says presently; "not half that of the other."

"Still, I think it would do very nicely," interposes she meekly. "My only fear is that she will not take either of those young men into favour."

"She must be very dead, then, to her own interests," returns Sir Hugh, in a low tone. "She little knows the crash that lies before her."

He sighs heavily, and disappears into his dressing-room.

CHAPTER XIII.

The play's the thing."

"Pleasure is oft a visitant; but pain
Clings cruelly to us."

THE Browns' visit is drawing to a close. Nearly a month has elapsed since their arrival, and Mrs. Brown begins to speak seriously of the day that shall see them depart. No limit had been fixed for the visit when they first spoke of coming, as would have been done to more aristocratic guests, Sir Hugh having declared against it.

Mrs. Brown's gentle intimation is, for the most part, received with disfavour. Sir Hugh has, somehow, once again fallen in love with his old schoolfellow, her husband, and the younger members of the family have learned to look upon the Browns as beings distinctly desirable. As for Lady Olivia, glancing at the son-in-law she could so honestly have welcomed, she sighs a sigh of deepest regret.

"We must give a ball, or something, before their departure," whispers Sir Hugh, vaguely.

After much arguing, this "something" resolves itself into *tableaux vivants* first and a dance afterwards. The idea is hailed with rapture by the minor members, and at once carries the day. Imogen alone shows a marked coolness about the whole proceedings.

Four o'clock has been chimed musically by the ormolu clock that rests high up on the old carven chimney-piece in the hall at The Chevies. Though large and spacious, as old halls born in the fifteenth century ever are, it is lit by the blazing fire alone—a wood fire, that roars and crackles, and defies the wintry blasts without, and throws weird shadows into distant corners.

The mantelpiece, that rises to the oaken ceiling, is carved fantastically into little hideous heads adorned with horns that grin out at one with every flash from the pine logs. Low cosy chairs are scattered about the hall broadcast, and soft skins of many beasts lie prone upon the polished floor.

Grouped round the fire that burns upon the hearthstone, and is innocent of such mean modern innovations as grates and bars, sit the younger Heriots, the younger Browns, and Phil Bohun, who had dropped in upon them about an hour ago, and had stayed on to get, presumably, his tea. The whole group, warmed by the flames, so red and brilliant, create a picture that might have found favour in the sight of any artist.

Imogen, unconsciously a central figure, is lying back in a low armchair, her fair hair contrasting gorgeously with the rich crimson of its velvet covering that gleams blood-red in the flickering light. At her feet, upon a tiger-skin, lies Patricia, gay and animated, supporting vigorously her own opinions against the attacks made upon them by society in general. Sandie and Phil Bohun are lounging on either side of her. On the right, Elinor Brown, in a still lower chair than Imogen's, and one much more childish and unpretending, is leaning a little forward, in a gown of some warm, white stuff, talking with all the animation that belongs to her (it is not much) to Tom Heriot, with a view to taking captive his unsuspecting heart. She looks very small, and very innocent, and very plain, if the truth be told! But in a picture, after all, contrasts are desirable.

Perhaps Tom Heriot feels she is doing her best in a good cause, because, with his elbow on his knee, and his eyes looking straight into hers, he makes himself altogether agreeable to her. As for Felix Brown, he is sitting a little apart, leaning somewhat against the dark carving of the chimney-piece, with his blue eyes, soft and beautiful, fixed upon the golden flames.

"A tableau taken from each of the 'Idylls' would be charming," says Patricia decisively, *à propos* of the very last argument.

"I always agree with you on principle," puts in Sandie.

"And there is something so charmingly new about the 'Idylls.' One has heard of them once or twice, but no more!"

"They are younger than the eternal Huguenots and 'The Black Brunswicker,' at all events," protests Patricia indignantly.

"They are! they are! For my part, I adore Tennyson. Even his twaddle is sweet in mine ears; and his 'Idylls' are, of course, superb. Let us have one from them, by all means."

"Bah! you jest!" says Patricia, with a pretty shrug of her prettier shoulders; "yet there is meaning in what I say, too."

She leans back upon her tiger-couch, and looks up at Imogen for encouragement.

"Ah! help me," she entreats.

"Not only meaning, but hope," returns Imogen, laughing, and extending to her her slender white hand. "I was fast sinking into the depths of despair; but now I rise to the surface once more—I see daylight. Imagine, for example, that scene where Geraint first sees Enid at her father's table, deftly serving the guests, yet looking so sweet withal."

"And that other scene from Elaine——"

"Where she is floating down the river," says Captain Heriot, sure of a good reception.

"Certainly not!" exclaims Patricia indignantly. "Bless me! are you a fossil just awakened from your doze of a thousand years?"

"No, no, no! We must have nothing so *borné* as that. If Elaine is to be dragged into it, let us have her, at least, in something new. Where she is in the garden with Sir Launcelot, perhaps, or on her death-bed with her brothers round her."

"That is where she is 'shrilling,' isn't it?" asked Sandie, innocently.

Very properly, no one answers him. Very improperly, he declines to accept this open expression of disapproval.

"Who is going to 'shrill?'" he asks, plaintively. "It will require a lot of practice, won't it? And, after all, I

don't believe it will sound well. The county may not like being shrilled at. They won't be accustomed to it; and you know people are always shy at the first bite, and——"

"Sandie, if you would only——"

"My dear girl, I'm awfully sorry, but I couldn't really! I understand country prejudices, if *you* don't; and to gown myself in feminine garments, even with the object of reducing my audience to a state of coma with the length and strength of my 'shrills,' would not compensate me for the certainty of being cut by everybody right and left directly afterwards."

Patricia, opening a big black fan with a disdainful flourish, holds it up before Sandie's face so as completely to conceal him from the rest.

"Little boys," says she scornfully, "should be seen and not heard,"

"My own sentiments precisely," murmurs Sandie from behind this barricade, "uttered with an originality of which I am incapable. As a little boy, I wish to be seen, and not as a mawkish girl. And I don't want to be heard at all! Not in that part at least: it wouldn't suit. Now then," coming gaily from behind the fan, "who is going to have it? Who can 'shrill?' A penny for the best performer. Miss Brown, Patricia, Imogen; don't all speak at once. The offer, I know, is tempting, but——"

"Is it before or after dinner?" asks Captain Heriot suddenly, screwing his glass into his left eye, and proceeding to examine his brother with mournful amazement. "This is a sad moment," he says presently. "He seems to me very badly intoxicated. I regret exceedingly, Miss Brown, that he should have so far forgotten himself in your presence."

Miss Brown laughs and says, "Naughty Mr. Sandie!" with a melancholy attempt at coquetry, and in a small high-pitched voice that jars upon the nerves like the tuning of a violin.

"I think fairy tales make the best tableaux," says Bohun after a moment's pause. "They are so utterly improbable, that they are extremely possible."

"And yet I wanted Imogen to be a 'Marguerite,'" ob-

jects Patricia. "See her hair, her colouring, her pensiveness. She would be charming. Faust might be in the background admiring, and——"

"And Mephistopheles!—who is to represent him?" asks Bohun.

"You!" casting a little saucy glance at him over her shoulder. "The flames of this ruddy fire have betrayed to me the satanic expression that characterises you. You will be the right man in the right place."

"And Faust?" asks Miss Brown.

"You will be that, will you not?" says Patricia, looking quickly at Felix.

"Anything." There is a slight hesitation in his manner. "Anything that you wish, or that will please Miss Heriot."

Imogen, as though his words have roused her, turns her eyes calmly upon his.

"It is an old idea, time-worn, hideous," she says. "Do not compel me to be a 'Marguerite.'"

"One only requires a flaxen tail, a satchel, and a strait-waistcoat to be the heroine of Goethe's masterpiece upon the spot," objects Sandie. "A melancholy thought when one comes to reflect upon it."

"Sandie!" cries Patricia nervously, "take care. Young people often choke when they talk too fast."

At this moment a loud knocking at the hall-door startles them all into a fuller life.

"Ah! what is that?" exclaims Imogen quickly, and then laughs at herself a little impatiently.

"'Tis but a gentle tapping, tapping at our chamber-door," returns Sandie reassuringly.

Meanwhile the door has been flung wide, and a tall lissom figure, clad in a riding-habit, comes rapidly into the full glare of the firelight. She brings with her a cold breath from the night without.

It is Sylvia Yelverton! There may be cold without, indeed; but there is none in her brilliant lips and gleaming eyes as she stands smiling upon the fire-lit group. It is a positive pleasure to look on her, she is so replete with instant life—so fresh, so warm, so bright.

"Ah, Sylvia!" cries Imogen.

Tom Heriot, as though involuntarily, rises from his seat and goes towards her. Watching this sudden movement of his, Elinor Brown's pale grey eyes take into them a little shade of steel, and then droop, and, with a slow cat-like gesture, she rubs the palm of one hand over the back of the other.

"You have come in a good moment, Sylvia!" cries Patricia joyfully. "We were just at our wits' ends. You shall save us from Colney Hatch! It will take some time to reduce us to reason, so I warn you—now we have got you—you won't see your home again to-night."

"I must indeed!" eagerly. "I have ridden over with a message from my father to yours, and the answer I have promised papa to bring back to him in less than an hour."

"A fig for promises of that sort!"

"But what is it about, Sylvia? Nothing serious, I hope?" asks Imogen anxiously.

"Not very. Turnips, I think," returns Sylvia gravely.

"Turnips!" indignantly. "And do you think turnips are to be weighed in the balance with our tottering intellects? Why, I thought it was a matter of life or death. Sandie, tell Sylvia's man to tell his master that she will not be home to-night."

"It is useless," declares Sylvia, detaining Sandie by a gesture. "I—there is a reason why I must be at home very early to-morrow—long before your breakfast-hour; so it is better I should go now."

"If that's all," declares Captain Heriot, who has not yet spoken, but who is standing by her side, "make your mind easy. I myself will drive you home at cock-crow to-morrow, or even before that mystic hour, if need be."

As he speaks he takes from her her whip in a rather masterful fashion.

"You will stay?"

"Yes." She smiles at him. "Sandie, tell Thomas to give my love to papa, and say I shall be at home to-morrow before he has left his room."

The message and the messenger despatched, they all fall once more into their former attitudes, Sylvia being pressed

into a delicious little velvet chair close to Imogen, and once again misery takes possession of them.

"It is of no use," cries Patricia, breaking out; "we can't think of *anything*. We had better give up the idea, and have a ball at once, and no break-down beforehand. It is too great a worry."

"What! the tableaux?" asks Sylvia.

"Yes, yes; they are maddening!"

"It is the capacity for worry," says Sandie gravely, "that constitutes the chief difference between man and brute. *We* feel worry; therefore we are not brutes. Let us congratulate ourselves!"

"It is very sad—very sad, indeed," murmurs Tom Heriot, looking at him with a latent regret in his eye.

"Tom is not well," retorts Sandie grimly. "One cannot give way to words of wisdom before him without being dubbed insane. Whereas if justice of the commonest description were only shown me, all here would be hanging on my conversation."

"It is too loose to hang anything upon," remarks Captain Heriot mournfully, whereupon they all laugh.

"We have brought ourselves down to the level of fairy tales, it appears," says Patricia, appealing to Sylvia with a rather aggrieved air. But Sylvia fails her.

"Ah, delicious!" cries she. "After all, every bit of real sentiment we know is embodied in those sweet old romances. But have you decided upon anything yet?"

"Nothing," Sandie assures her genially. "We are still in a state of chaos so far as our dramatic entertainment is concerned. The whole affair at present is as vague as the horizon line on a wet day, or our conclusions on the subjects of the First Cause."

"There is the 'Maiden all forlorn,'" says Sylvia. "It would be rather fun, wouldn't it?"

"Specially for the man 'all tattered and torn.'"

"It shall be—it must be!" protests Patricia, going off into a little burst of laughter. "If nobody else wants to be the maid, I do."

"And *I* want to be the man," declares Phil Bohun boldly, who is still laughing. "I feel like it, somehow."

Somebody, somewhere, has declared a belief in the picturesqueness of rags; let it be my mission to undeceive him."

"I know another," says Sandie, "'Puss in boots.' There is a scene in that that ought to take the house by storm. You remember where Puss's master is bathing, and somebody steals his clothes; and the princess comes by, and he can't get out of the water, don't you know, for want of his trou—clothes, I mean, and——"

"I have heard it said," interrupts Captain Heriot mildly, "that a vivid imagination is oftentimes as great a curse as a blessing. Thanks, dear Sandie. Your suggestion is unique, but I think we will put off the adoption of it until the world is a few days older. The nude, though admirable on a pedestal, is not thought well of by society at large when in the flesh. That your friends would condemn your idea is a moral certainty."

"An *immoral* certainty," corrects Bohun in an amused whisper.

"Old King Cole, and his fiddlers three,' would do very well," suggests Patricia; "and there is a funny old rhyme beginning

'Lavender blue
Lavender green;
If I were a king,
You should be queen.'

I saw a picture of it once, and it pleased me. It represented a young man offering in courtly fashion a sprig of lavender to his ladye love; and oh! the quaintness of their garments! It delighted me."

"It is very pretty. Imogen——" Sylvia breaks off abruptly in her impulsive speech, and looks meaningly at Patricia.

"Ah, yes; Miss Brown will be that," says Patricia courteously.

"Please do not waste a good part on *me*," entreats Elinor with suspicious amiability. She looks past Patricia at Sylvia Yelverton. "I feel convinced I should make but a sorry attempt at anything in the way of acting. It is not in my nature. Give me some minor position, some very secondary part, and perhaps I may help you without

disgracing myself. You"—she speaks very sweetly, and now addresses Miss Yelverton directly—it is plain she has not as yet forgiven Captain Heriot's defection on her entrance—"you are a born actress, I am sure."

Sylvia laughs. Perhaps, though she knows her least, she best understands the little shallow venomous nature of the pale insignificant girl now regarding her with falsely smiling lips.

"You think acting is a second nature to me?" she says. "Well, and so you won't be Prince Lavender's love? Then you, Imogen, you must undertake it. It will suit you altogether, and Mr. Brown will make an excellent Lavender."

Imogen leans forward until the firelight breaks in a flood of colour over her face. Whether it is the extreme force and strength of the flame that creates the impression no one knows, but for the moment she looks extraordinarily pale.

"I am almost sure the part would *not* suit me," she says gently. "I can't explain why, but I know it." She turns suddenly, and fixes her great eyes on Felix. "You know it too, don't you?" she asks. The little ring of imperious defiance in her tone is unheard, or, if heard, is misunderstood by all but him.

"Yes," returns he slowly. He gives her back her glance steadily, and then a smile that is half contemptuous curls his lips. "It was an impertinence offering you the part, wasn't it?" he says.

Patricia exclaims a little, and Sylvia stares.

"What! too small, too unimportant a part!" asks the latter. "Pouf! Mr. Brown! To where then has your brain gone? What does it matter in a tableau whether one be peeress or peasant? The effect is everything. However, as nobody will have the part, *I* will."

"And now for Lavender," says Patricia. "Who shall it be? Tom?"

"He is too dark, perhaps," objects Miss Yelverton, regarding him critically. "My Lavender, I feel assured, should revel in yellow locks and languishing eyes, green and blue as his offering."

"As you please, of course," replies Captain Heriot, stiffly.

"Ah! if *I* pleased," laughs Sylvia, saucily, "I would turn your hair to gold this moment. And even as it is—well, I dare say you will do well enough. A dark Lavender will be a change. How many have we decided upon now? Three? We are getting on. But we must enlarge our company. Miss Brown"—pleasantly—"you really *must* consent to sacrifice your feelings for once, and come to our assistance; we cannot do without you."

"Indeed, Elinor! Yes, it must be done," supplements Patricia gaily. "You will make a charming Cinderella, for example."

"Charming! Your feet are so undeniable!" adds Sylvia artfully ("she really wasn't worth the fuss we made about her, but you see we were so short of hands," Miss Yelverton said afterwards): but just now her manner is absolutely benign.

"Of course, if you really *want* me," murmurs the meek Elinor mildly, with a reluctance that delights Sylvia—"I should not like to think that by my refusal I spoiled your entertainment—I should reconsider the matter. But display of any sort is so contrary to my feelings—" She pauses as though slightly distressed. Upon the footstool before her, in the full glare of the firelight, for all the world to see, her feet, clad in dainty Louis Quinze shoes, are disporting themselves with an innocent obtrusiveness.

"To display such feet as those would hardly be accounted a crime—rather a benefit to society," says Tom Heriot gallantly. They really *are* very pretty feet; her one sole charm, did she but acknowledge it!

At this she simpers, as they all knew she would, and draws back the little feet beneath her frilled skirts.

"I had no idea! I didn't know, indeed! I'm so——" she stammers away into silence.

"Ah! I wish you hadn't done that!" murmurs Tom Heriot, reproachfully, looking at the forsaken footstool.

"Then you *will* be Cinderella?" demands Miss Yelverton, just a little sharply.

"Yes, if I can be of any use," returns the bashful Elinor from out her shadowed corner.

"And, Tom, you will be the Prince?" goes on Sylvia, a dash of dictation in her tone.

"Enchanted, I'm sure," returns he calmly.

"I'll tell you all one thing," puts in Sandie at this moment, who has just awakened from a cheering doze. "Have you forgotten that when Lord Clanbrassil was here yesterday you promised *him* a part, and another to Captain Hardy?"

"They'll have our lives, if we leave them out," declares Captain Heriot.

"Then let us take early precautions to save ourselves," says Patricia. "They are two of the most impossible-looking people for posing that *I* know of, and I frankly state, from the start, that I shan't appear with either, for all the bribery and corruption in the world."

"Would they stand alone—or fall—as the case might be?" asks Sandie, anxiously; "because, if so, I have an idea. *Two* ideas!"

"Dear Sandie—consider! *Two*?" murmurs Sylvia, correctively.

"Two whole ones, and all to myself!" protests Sandie boldly, making a furtive grab for the purposes of revenge at the small riding-boot that *just* shows itself at the hem of her cloth skirt. But she knows him too well not to be able to avoid him dexterously. "Listen," says he, when he has once more regained his equilibrium. "I would make one Peter Simple, 'fishing for a whale in his mother's pail,' and the other Peter Piper, 'picking his peck of pepper.'"

"If you can't be of any use, Sandie, I do request you won't annoy us with your folly," says Patricia indignantly, who has, somehow, been believing in his "two ideas" up to this. "Imogen, you must help us here. Lord Clanbrassil, in all probability, does not know what a nursery rhyme or a fairy tale means. Yours will, therefore, be the pleasing task to enlighten him. Will you be the Fair One with the golden locks to his Avenant? We can arrange the scene later on."

"Yes, do, Imogen!" entreats Sylvia.

Still Imogen hesitates. She might even have refused, but that Felix Brown at this moment appeals to her.

"Believe me, it is folly to refuse," he says, in a clear tone, leaning towards her in such a manner that she is compelled to look at him. The mocking smile is still upon his lips, that now are white as death, and his eyes seem to burn into hers. In his whole expression lies a terrible disdain. What do his words mean? They—ambiguous as they are—and his sneering glance decide her answer.

"I should like it," she says very softly, turning to Sylvia. "It is a very picturesque part—very idyllic."

She leans back again in her chair as though she has come somewhat abruptly to an end of all she has to say.

"Then you will?" asks Sylvia.

"If you wish it."

"Not if *I* wish it; if *you* do," persists Sylvia, laughing. Miss Heriot looks at her curiously.

"I do wish it," she says at last, tranquilly.

Felix Brown draws a long breath and goes back to his original position, that is a little out of the glare of the tell-tale fire. A passionate word or two rises to his lips, but he suppresses all emotion by a violent effort. Folding his arms across his breast, he remains for the next five minutes as motionless as though he had been stricken into stone.

"Number four," declares Sylvia in a satisfied whisper. But Patricia does not smile, and gives herself a little soft turn upon her tiger-skin that so places her that she can no longer see Felix's face.

"I know a capital fairy tale, 'The Yellow Dwarf.' Remember Royce in it?" asks Phil Bohun suddenly of no one in particular. "Hardy has not been provided for yet, and he might be the Yellow Dwarf—eh?"

"I know it; a lovely story," cries Patricia enthusiastically, "and the very thing for——"

Here an interruption occurs. At the far end of the long hall, where the shadows lie thickest, appears a yellow star that soon grows into a gleaming globe. It is the butler with a lamp. Behind him comes a footman bearing a tray. A little table is drawn up close to Imogen's elbow; and with a thrill of ecstasy they know that it is tea!

All rouse into a state of life that is exuberant, and trim themselves a little in a surreptitious way. A lamp coming upon darkness is almost as unpleasant as truth following upon a lie.

"Where is mamma, Meadows?" asks Imogen, addressing the hoary-headed butler, who is placing before her in tempting array the hot cakes, tiny and crisp, the pound-cake heavy and indigestible, and the sponge-cake, the amiable go-between, with a most loving care.

"My lady sent you her love, 'm, and she 'opes you will excuse her this evening; she's gone to lie down for a bit, 'aving a bad 'eadache."

It being well known to her household that Lady Olivia always takes a siesta at this hour to recruit her forces for the night's campaign, and as it is an innocent fiction of hers that a severe headache alone drives her to her couch at this abnormal hour, nobody is very deeply afflicted by this painful intelligence.

"And Mrs. Brown?" pursues Imogen.

"Please, 'm, I'm not very sure, 'm," wheezes the old butler, who is slightly asthmatic, "but I think she is resting, too. I'm *not* sure of the headache, 'm," respectfully; "but in other respects the message was the same."

"Not another lamp, Meadows, on your peril!" exclaims Patricia, seeing he is about to light the bracket-lamps. "And, Imogen, give me lots of sugar in my tea. And give Felix lots too; he adores sugar."

As if by one consent, they have all closed round the tea-table, and are looking pleasantly expectant. Even the frigid Elinor seems to have thawed in part.

"What was our last hitch?" asks Sandie presently, when he has eaten considerably more pound-cake, hot cake, and sponge-cake than is good for the human frame. "The Yellow Dwarf, eh? Sylvia, you shall be Toubelle. The name doesn't suit you in reality, but I wish to pay you a compliment."

"And you will be the Yellow Dwarf?" says Sylvia, with decision.

"No; that wouldn't suit *me* either. Hardy can be that. I shall be the King of the Gold Mines!"

"A very good arrangement," decides Captain Heriot, who knows he cannot be the hero of her piece twice.

"Nonsense!" cries Patricia. "If a compliment is to be paid to poor Captain Hardy, we can hardly do it by asking him to be a hunchback. No, indeed! Sandie can be the gnome, if he wishes; but Captain Hardy must be Sylvia's lover."

"Lover!" exclaims Tom Heriot, with impulsive force.

He had a small bit of cake in his hand as he spoke, and somehow it drops at this moment right into Sylvia's cup.

"Thank you, Tom; I don't think I care for such delicate attentions as those," says she laughing.

Nevertheless, she lifts the saturated morsel with her spoon from its watery grave, and, after a moment's serious thought, puts it in an abstracted fashion between her lips.

Presently a gong sounds through the house. It evidently comes from somewhere very near.

"Dressing-bell!" explains Tom Heriot, rising with a yawn. "I wish I was a North American; or, better still, a Zulu. Blessed are the people to whom garments are unknown!"

"Go up to my room, Sylvia, through the school-room, and take any gown you see," whispers Imogen to her guest. "I shall be with you immediately."

"I'll race you to the head of the stairs," says Sandie, looking impartially around him; and soon the old hall is left almost deserted, with a dying fire and a solitary lamp, and two people who are looking somewhat steadfastly upon each other.

CHAPTER XIV.

"I am ashamed
That thou hast power to shake my manhood thus."
"Love's common unto all the mass of creatures,
As Life and breath."

'WAS it necessary?' asks Felix slowly.

His face is pale to the very lips; but his eyes are alight, and one can judge by his nostrils that he is breathing somewhat quickly.

"Necessary? What is it, then, you would have me understand?" asks Imogen in turn, standing tall and erect before him, her head slightly thrown backwards.

There is a little set expression about her haughty mouth that is almost cruel. Many good women can at times be very nearly brutal. This proud expression suits her, however, and though terrible to the man now gazing at her with all his soul set upon the gaining of her, and with his heart at variance with his common sense, which bids him beware, only adds to her beauty in his sight.

"Think!" he says sternly.

A curious pause ensues, during which both refuse to lower their eyes before the other. Then he breaks out again:

"Did I require a *second* lesson, then, that you should condemn me to such an open demonstration of your meaning? Is all the world to be taught how it is between you and me?"

The subdued passion that fills him rings through the room. He lays his hand upon the table that separates them with a sudden but quiet force. It is a large hand,

handsomely formed, and now the veins stand out upon it in thick cords.

"You and me!" She repeats his words, as though incredulous of the fact that she has heard aright; and the very calm of her tone, as contrasted with his agitation, is in itself an insolence. A half-smile curves her lips; she lets her lids droop over her eyes. "Did you know you coupled your name with mine?" she asks, and lets the smile widen until it would have been lovely, but for the contempt that mars it.

Then as suddenly as it came the smile fades, and she lifts her lids and looks at him with flashing eyes.

"What is this all about?" she demands imperiously. "Why do you stand there to reproach me? To take me—*me*—to task, as it were? If I did not choose to accept the parts they would have assigned me—parts most unsuited to me—who is to blame? I refused them, certainly, but only because——"

"I was to be your companion in them," interrupts he coldly. "Be true at least to your own conscience. Yet there is one thing," with a quick sigh, "that I would you had known before you so far hurt yourself as to hurt me—your guest." He pauses, and smiles grimly. "You see, I do your better nature full justice," he says, his eyes on the ground.

"And that?" demands she, tapping her fingers impatiently upon the table.

"How it would have been impossible to me, *parvenu* though I am," returns he bitterly, "to take advantage of the dilemma in which they unconsciously placed you."

"You mean—" she hesitates, and then goes on again, her eyes upon the table, "that you would have declined to take part in a tableau with me?"

"Certainly, knowing as I do your sentiments towards me. You can hardly doubt the truth of what I say," he ends passionately.

There is honest appeal, too, in the glance he turns upon her.

"No." The admission comes slowly from her, and with evident difficulty. "I regret this idea did not occur to me

sooner." She says this reluctantly, and plainly by command of her conscience alone, and to the agonising of her self-love. "But what you now say I believe to be the truth."

She turns from him with a gesture full of dislike, and, striking a match, lights the candle in a silver candlestick that one of the men had placed near her.

Felix, however, has something more to say. He draws nearer to her.

"For the future," he says abruptly, "perhaps it is as well you should remember this—that *I* am as anxious to avoid all connection with you as you can possibly be to avoid it with me!"

Perhaps something in the impetuosity of his tone startles her! Who can tell? At all events, she pauses in the act of throwing away the ignited match that had lit her candle to look at him.

This pause is fatal! The delicate laces that edge the short sleeve of her gown, being caught and drawn inward by the flame, take fire. They grow into a blaze all suddenly, and spreading, encircle her with a lurid light.

A sharp cry breaks from her. A little cry that dies at its birth. In a moment, as it were, danger is at an end, and the burning sleeve is in the strong grasp of Felix.

There had been one unavoidable instant when his arm had forcibly held her to his heart! But that instant was so confused, so short, as to almost admit of the possibility that it had never existed. *Almost!*

"Are you in pain?—are you hurt?" asks he nervously, pushing up the burnt sleeve to look with a shuddering anxiety at the delicate flesh beneath. But no mark, no scar, offends his gaze. The soft, white, pretty rounded arm is without speck or stain; it is as perfect as it was an hour ago. However his fingers may have suffered, it, at least, is untouched by the furious fire.

Slowly, very slowly, he relinquishes his search; and just as slowly Imogen returns to her former self. Fear has taken flight: present knowledge remains. The candle—poor cause of this mere suspicion of a tragedy—is now burning brightly, and Felix with his left hand lifts it from the table and gives it to her.

In silence she takes it into a very tremulous grasp, and watches him mutely as he walks away from her down the long hall. He has almost reached the shadows beyond, when, driven by some irresistible impulse, she follows him.

"Let me see your hand?" she says in a low tone, full of eager agitation. "You have burnt yourself in my cause. I feel it—I know it!"—she pauses as though finding it impossible to go on. Then, "I have *indeed* hurt you!" she murmurs very faintly, such deep contrition in her tone as might give rise to the belief that her mind has wandered backwards to other scenes that now raise remorse within her breast.

She is looking up at him with quivering, half-parted lips and eyes warm with tears. Unconsciously, in her distress, she has laid her hand upon his arm. She is so lovely in the abandonment of her regret that she might well have softened the hearts of most men; but she fails to soften Felix.

"You are mistaken," he says icily. "Believe me, it is out of your power to hurt me in any way!"

A little unpleasant smile curves his lips. He does not move, but glances significantly at the pretty, slender hand still resting on his arm. In no way has he sought to withdraw from her touch; but this glance is worse than a repulse.

As though stung to the quick, she removes the clinging hand and steps back from him with all the dignity of an offended woman. Still smiling, he bows to her carelessly, and turning away is soon lost to sight in the dimness of the corridor that leads to the library.

He might, perhaps, have entered this room did not the sound of voices within check him. Hurrying onwards again, he seeks his own room by the private staircase that monks of old had trodden, breviaries in hand, on their way to and from the ancient stone chapel, great portions of which still remain.

* * * * *

Inside the library that he had so discreetly passed, a row royal is taking place! Upon the hearthrug Tom

Heriot and Miss Yelverton are indulging in a passage of arms of the most determined kind. Up to this, in the preparations for it, no expense has been spared, and weapons of all sorts are now in free circulation.

"Of course, you can do as you like," says Tom Heriot.

"Of course," repeats Miss Yelverton, rebelliously.

"But what you can see in a man with a light wig, and blue eyes, and crimson cheeks passes my comprehension."

"I can see that he is capable of making himself agreeable, at all events."

"Which *I* am not, you mean! Well, I can bless my stars, at all events, that it has never occurred to *me* to paint myself."

"*Paint?*"

"He has got two crimson spots on either cheek. If it isn't paint, it has quite the same effect, and is, therefore, just as undesirable. You may admire Captain Hardy to the top of your bent, but you must excuse *my* doing so. He is more like a doll, or a little girl, than anything else I know."

"I don't think you know much!" says Miss Yelverton with increasing scorn.

"I dare say not. But, with the lisp that fellow has, how you can call him *manly* is to me——"

"I don't know that I have called him anything—not even *bad names!*" interrupts Miss Yelverton severely.

"Neither have I, for the matter of that."

"Oh! haven't you? You have called him 'doll' and 'little girl.'"

"Very mild, very mild indeed! Too good for him," declares Captain Heriot viciously.

"You are simply absurd in your injustice. I see no reason why Captain Hardy should not take part with us in an innocent tableau!"

"*Us!*" stormily. "*You*, if you please!"

"Well!" defiantly; "*ME*, then!"

"I see no reason either," applying a forty-horse power to the laying of his spleen. "I am only expressing a very gentle surprise that you should take into favour a man so devoid of personal attractions!"

"Gentle?" murmurs Miss Yelverton with a dreadful intonation.

"Unaccountably—*abominably* gentle!" returns Captain Heriot, whose flint has caught fire. "But why should I dispute his merits? If he is lovely in *your* eyes, that is everything! Just now, before them all, you spoke of him as your lover."

"Tom!"

"Your stage-lover, at all events. Of course, we all could see that you wanted him—not me—in that Lavender affair also. By-the-bye, why not have him? I resign in his favour. Tableaux to me are a wearying of the flesh. A play I consider a good thing, with some fun, some *meaning* in it; but tableaux are the most inane and tiring things in the world!"

"Where were you stationed last, Tom?" asks Miss Yelverton suddenly, with suspicious interest.

"Fermoy."

"There isn't much good society round there, is there? It is singularly devoid of *old* families, eh?"

"No, it isn't; it is full of them. Why?"

"Because your manners have gone so terribly to the bad," returns she with an extravagant regret.

For a moment Heriot looks as if he is dying to laugh, but the situation is too much for him. All idea of mirth dies as it is born.

Miss Yelverton, after her last great shot, has sunk into an arm-chair, and is regarding her folded hands with interest. Captain Heriot, having regarded them too, and come to the thousandth conclusion that they are the loveliest and the whitest in the world, seats himself upon the edge of the table near her.

"Sylvia," says he, in an altogether different tone, "I wish you would promise me never again to look at that fellow, Hardy."

Miss Yelverton opens her lips as if to speak, and then closes them again. Plainly she has changed her mind about what she was going to say. She now directs her attention to the fire. Much inspiration may be drawn from a fire.

When quite half a minute has elapsed, she turns again to him:

"You ask me that," she says in a low tone; "and yet you—you look at Miss Brown."

There is a reproachful anger in her expressive eyes that renders her lovely.

"Miss Brown!—I——" stammers Tom Heriot, honestly amazed.

"Yes. Why should you try to deny it? A pretty reproachfulness grows upon her, until now her lips are trembling. "Has one not eyes? Can one not see? All this evening you sat *staring* at her; and you said some odious things about her *hateful* feet!"

To slip from a table on to the arm of a chair that is close by is an easy task. Tom Heriot achieves it.

"Oh, Sylvia! If I could only *believe* that you cared," he says earnestly.

"I do care. One must always care to see an old friend behaving as—as he should not. And to hear you pay such fulsome compliments to her. It was not that I *cared*," Miss Yelverton assures him with emphasis, "but that I think it was not nice. And one," softly, "would like an old friend to be nice."

"Old friends be hanged!" says Captain Heriot, with more meaning than elegance. He has his arm upon the back of her chair by this time, and row through some inadvertence on his part (it is the most curious thing possible, if you come to think of it) it slips, and finds a resting-place around her neck.

She laughs nervously, and stirs a little.

"Oh, no, I would not have you *hanged*," she says.

His arm tightens round her.

"I love you," he says simply, but very earnestly. "Sylvia, can you love me?"

"Love!" she says tremulously; "who knows anything about that? To like, to esteem, is possible; but who understands the meaning of love."

"I do," declares Heriot boldly; "I know all about it! I love *you*. I have loved you all my life, I think; so surely it is time that you should begin to love me."

"Ah, well, there is plenty of time," says Sylvia. Then she starts. Footsteps, far off in the hall outside, but coming ever nearer, fall upon her ear. "Someone is coming," she whispers quickly.

"Let them," replies Tom valiantly; "only say you love me."

"How can I, in such a hurry?" She regards him with some indignation; then as the steps come nearer, her expression grows more stern. "Tom," she says solemnly, "if it is *that girl* who is coming here to pursue you (and something tells me that it is), I warn you to beware. Mark my words! she means to marry you!"

"I'm sure of it," agrees the wise Tom; "yet you alone can save me, and you won't. *Say* you love me, Sylvia!"

"I can't! Yes! No! There isn't any time," murmurs she.

"Say it!" persists he.

"Oh, Tom, do let me go! And if *she* comes, *do* say you won't be civil to her."

"I'll be distinctly rude, if you will only say yes," says Captain Heriot.

"Yes, then," whispers she. "Ah! here she comes! In another moment she will be in the room!" There is a panic in her tone. She tries to release herself from his arms.

"That proves there is not a moment to be lost," declares Captain Heriot, with admirable promptitude, and, stooping, he presses his lips to hers with all a lover's warmth.

A second later he is alone, and somebody enters the room.

"All alone, Tom?" asks Sandie.

"All alone," acquiesces Captain Heriot, with the utmost cheerfulness.

CHAPTER XV.

"Ah, sweet, too sweet to me, my sweet ! I know
Love, sleep, and death go to the sweet same tune."

THE night has arrived ! The Chevies is in a commotion ! Rehearsals, numerous though they have been, are now talked of as being inadequate to the occasion, and discontent prevails. At the last moment—now, at *this* moment, when the curtain is about to rise, and the county is to be electrified—not one amongst the performers but feels convinced he or she could have performed their neighbours' parts far better than their own, and that it is a malignant fate that has consigned them the parts they have. In any other rôle honour and *éclat* might be theirs ; but now natural talent is only born to be most miserably cast aside. All, in fact, is gloom.

The guests are assembled in the larger reception-room. Before them is a curtain, that in every-day life reveals a folding-door. Behind this is a smaller room, that is now called "*the stage*."

Already the younger members of the audience are showing signs of impatience, when a tinkling bell is heard somewhere. The piano and fiddle—that have been inserted as a means of alleviating wrathful criticism—die a sudden death, and the curtain rises to slow music of another kind.

Through the pale mist of flesh-coloured net, or tulle, the living figures posed and draped with marvellous care—seem like rounded images on the canvases of ancient masters. All the exhibits are charming ; but Imogen as "the fair one with the golden locks," in her white gown, and with the exquisite charm of her face and figure, carries all admiration with her. The soft girlish smile,

the humility, the suspicion of expectation on her lips, all render her a picture as tender as it is perfect.

Sylvia, as Prince Lavender's adored one, is charming (she does not appear as Toubelle in the Yellow Dwarf, after all), and Patricia as the Maid Forlorn is delicious. Cinderella might have been worse as Miss Brown; and altogether no heartaches followed on the tableaux at The Chevies. But in the long run everyone thought only of Imogen in her long straight white gown, and of the extreme beauty of her face.

After the tableaux a dance was arranged to follow, and now, the earlier entertainment being at an end, actors, actresses, and all the world is eager for the coming fray. The impromptu theatre has speedily been emptied, the green-room is a desert, and only Felix—who had appeared in some scenes not mentioned in the last chapter and arranged later on—feeling scarcely in the humour for dancing or any other kind of amusement; remains there, and has dropped wearily into an armchair in front of the fireplace amidst a perfect chaos of dropped properties and odds and ends of wigs and draperies.

He is feeling sadly tired and dispirited, and out of gauge with all his gay surroundings. A sense of miserable depression is weighing him down. His one thought is Imogen; his one fear that each moment may bring him news of her engagement to Clanbrassil.

For the past week this fear has been growing in intensity, as he has witnessed with secret anguish the apparently satisfied, if indifferent, manner in which she has accepted Clanbrassil's marked attentions. For this fatuity, this *meanness*, as it appears to him, he hates himself, yet he cannot conquer it. It seems his fate to be compelled to love and long for a woman who shows him plainly every hour of the day in how small a proportion she values either him or his devotion. Yet still he loves!

These thoughts, rising tumultuously to the surface, rouse him from the enforced calm that habit lays upon us all. Springing involuntarily to his feet, he throws out his arms from him with a quick impulse, as though resolved upon the moment to be *free*.

But the moment is unpropitious. The door opens, and Imogen, entering with the hurried step of one in haste, comes quickly up to the fireplace. She fails to notice his presence until she is within a foot of him, and then she starts violently, as one might who has met with a disagreeable surprise.

The fire blazes up generously at this instant, and throws its radiance upon the lovely girl, standing now motionless upon the hearthrug, clad in the bravery that might have adorned one of our great-grandmothers a century ago.

"I frightened you?" says Felix gently.

"A little," answers she simply.

She has had time to recover herself, yet still she draws her breath somewhat quickly, and looks at him with a slow but not unfriendly smile.

It is but seldom she has ever smiled on him. He might almost have counted the number of her gracious moments, so far as he is concerned, so that now her soft glance thrills him. Thus sweetly she had looked at him a few short nights ago, not with a smile, indeed, but with a glance full of tenderest concern and heaviest self-reproach. The remembrance of that night comes back to him now—the old hall dimly lit, the slender haughty figure, the face so perfect, so disdainful, the angry flame, the one swift moment when his arms held her, and the rapture of it. Even now he pales as he remembers it. And then the passionate revulsion of feeling, the strange coldness that had succeeded it, and her *—her* contrition—all comes back to him.

Again the lovely face, sweet with the pallor of remorse, is upraised to his; again the pretty hand lies with its soft pressure on his arm. Would that it lay so now!

Too late! He had repulsed her then, had scorned her tender mood, and flung from him with ruthless force the earnest pleadings of the lifted eyes. And now——

Once again in friendly wise she meets him. Shall he again refuse the gentle overture? How beautiful she looks in her old-world finery! With what a classic grace the white gown clings to her lissom form! How richly shines the firelight on its broad bands of gold! The

glorious hair, that half an hour ago hung far below her waist, is now twisted in some hurried graceful way around the stately head.

How sweet, how womanly, she looks ! How *near* ! The great grief that had yawned between them, dark and sullen, seems bridged to-night, and they stand together—the tranquil woman and the man who loves her ! Alas ! what a madness is that love !

But is it ? In this new-born gentleness of hers is there no element of encouragement ? Might it not be ? Could it not—— ? Other men have been loved ; is he alone to be the Pariah of his sex, cast out from all desire, all life, all good ?

Hope, that at times is the stealthiest, cruellest foe that man possesses, now holds out her hands to him. She leads him on with falsest imaginings, and strews before him, as he follows her, flowers fair but frail, whose perfume means but death. With light and buoyant steps he springs into the nectared path that leads him to despair.

Once more he looks into her eyes. A certain kindness lingers in their depths. Now, of a surety, she is kind ; to-morrow may see her kinder still. Paradise, perhaps, lies open to him ; shall he shun it ?

A mad desire to risk his all, to hear from her own lips his fate now, this *instant*, overpowers the common sense that would have bidden him beware. Imogen, who has been looking for something in a rather desultory fashion upon the several tables, now gives a little exclamation :

“ Ah, here it is ! ” she says, rescuing a small scented programme from amongst a mass of loose papers. As she regains the lost possession, she makes a movement as though to quit the room.

“ Give me a few minutes ! ” exclaims Felix suddenly, speaking so involuntarily that he is almost surprised himself when the words fall upon the air.

“ Certainly ! ” She pauses and looks at him. Her tone is one of marked amazement. “ A *very* few minutes, however, and no more, I am afraid, is all I can give you. See,” glancing at the clock, “ how late it grows. Dancing has already commenced.”

She says all this very pleasantly, and smiles at him again. But her smile this time is altogether different.

"I shall not detain you. A few words will explain to you," he hesitates nervously. "You must have seen," he goes on desperately—"you must know!"

"Stay!" interrupts Miss Heriot, faintly. "Do not go on! You have said enough, believe me. I would ask you——"

"It is too late!" protests he, passionately. "*I must go on!* The one thought that occupies me day and night must find a voice at last. Call it madness, if you will—and I am mad, I think, at times!" Here a terrible desolation creeps into his voice, telling her, now that she has led him to his destruction, how false and smiling hope is gliding from his grasp. "Yet, now that the time has come, you shall not prevent me from speaking." Then all at once his tone changes, and grows low and imploring. "Reject me! despise me, if you will!" he says; "only hear me!"

To this appeal, although he waits as if in expectation for it, she makes no reply. Perhaps, had she here once more forbidden him speech, he might for ever have held his peace. But no such command issues from her lips. As though silenced by some magnetic influence, she stands before him mute, her hands clasped before her, her eyes fixed immovably on his.

In the still, somewhat intense, positions into which they have both unconsciously fallen, they form a curious picture, with the leaping firelight gleaming on the extravagant costumes they have not yet had time to change, Felix in white satin breeches and rich ruffles, and carefully powdered hair; Miss Heriot with her trailing satin robe and costly embroideries of gold, with her fair hair also thinly powdered, and her soft white arms bared to the very shoulders.

The flaming logs flash and darken. Each brilliant ray darts with loving eagerness to Imogen's neck, to catch and sport with the dazzling gleams of light that spring from the jewels lying on her bosom, as it rises and falls with the emotion she strives in vain to subdue.

Unhappily her strange silence gives Felix a last encouragement.

"I love you," he says, almost in a whisper. "I have nothing more to add. I told you I should not keep you long. It does not take much time in the telling, does it?" cries he a little wildly. "It sounds poor, and meagre, and wretched when put into words? yet," with a sudden sense of weariness, "it is all I have to say."

"Love *me*? Impossible!"

She had moved a few steps back from him when he began speaking, and now holds out her hands, with the palms towards him, as though in repudiation of his words.

"*You*!" she says—"you who have so often——"

She pauses, as though forbidden by pride or generosity to recall certain words of his that had, at the time, wounded her self-esteem.

"What?" demands he.

Thus challenged, she complies with his desire.

"You who have so often given me to understand in what low esteem you hold me," she answers coldly, with a quick flash from her violet eyes.

"If I ever conveyed to you that impression, I lied," returns he vehemently.

He paces up and down the room with rapid steps for a moment or two, and then coming to an abrupt stop, looks at her.

"Is it altogether hopeless? Is there *any* chance for me?" he asks with the cold dulness of a man who knows at last the utter uselessness of his persistence.

She turns her eyes downwards and fixes them upon the carpet.

"Give me my answer," says he, in a curious tone.

"You should not have gone on," returns she at length, her voice low, but angry. "I forbade you at first to do so. It was unfair to compel me to listen when you knew I wished neither to hear nor to understand."

"Give me my answer!" persists he, stubbornly, as though deaf to these words of hers.

"What answer can I give?" She throws out her right hand with an impatient gesture. "Better, far better, ask for none. I warned you before. Take a second warning now, and leave me."

"Give me my answer!" he insists for the third time, sternly. Is it anything to her if he chooses to drink the bitter dregs to the last drop? "I will take it from your own lips, now."

"As you will have it, then," exclaims she, losing all moderation, "take from my own lips—*No!*"

A dead silence ensues. Felix's face is as white as death, Miss Heriot's scarcely less so; yet neither moves.

At length it is he who breaks the terrible quiet that already is growing insupportable.

"If I were somebody else, and you *could* have loved me, and yet my father made his money by trade, your answer would have been the same, would it not?" he asks calmly

"That can hardly matter now," coldly.

"It does to me. However, it is of no moment, really. But there is another thing. Is it true what I have heard, that you are willing to sell yourself to gain a title? Is that the truth?"

"You must be mad to talk to me like this," exclaims Imogen in a low, choked voice. "I will listen to no more of your questionings, sir. Let me pass."

"It *is* true, then," cries he passionately.

He seizes her hand as she passes him, and looks into her face with a strange intensity.

"And this is the woman to whom my whole soul is given," he breathes slowly. "I imagined you—*you*—incapable of such a thing, spite of my doubts and fears. See, now, how mistaken we may be in the idols we set up! I should be thankful for my disillusion; I should rejoice in that you spurned me, should I not? Yet always remember that even *that* poor consolation is denied me! I love you now in the hour of my disenchantment as I loved you yesterday, as I shall love you when dying. I beg you to remember that. Yet this, too, I would have you bear in mind, that a woman who, like you, could wilfully barter away her heart to gain a worldly position is not worthy to be the wife of any honest man!"

He almost flings her hand from him. As he does so, a little golden bangle falls tinkling to the ground.

Imogen, pale and cold with anger, stands silent. She

shivers perceptibly as she confronts him, and her right hand seeking the back of the chair near her clings to it nervously, as if for support.

"Ah! that will do," she says at last, tremulously. "You need say no more. If you were to think for ever, you could not say anything worse than that!"

She moves away from him quickly, but unsteadily. Her long gown, catching the little bracelet, drags it against a chair, and brings it again into remembrance. She pauses instinctively, and Felix, stooping, lifts it from the ground. In silence she extends her hand for it; in silence he refuses to give it to her thus, but passing it round the bare, soft arm fastens it there.

The pretty arm, that never can be his! A reckless feeling comes over him. He bends his head, and presses upon it a passionate, despairing, lingering kiss.

It is to him a final farewell to all things sweet and and lovable! As for Imogen, when he turns his head again, she is gone. Only the shadows of the room are left him.

In the hall, Miss Heriot, passing swiftly towards the private staircase, encounters Patricia, radiant in her filmy robes.

"Imogen! Not dressed yet!" cries she, dismayed.

And Imogen answers her quite calmly that she will be down in twenty minutes at the farthest, and goes on up the staircase in her usual graceful, unmoved fashion.

But when her door has closed upon her, a little curious feeling comes over her that threatens to upset her natural calm. She puts her hands up to her head, and pushes back her hair in a slow, thoughtful fashion.

What has happened? To what strange words has she been listening? It was a whirlwind, but now she is out of it, surely the sound of it should die from her ears, the discomfort from her breast?

Again that nervous trembling takes possession of her. Her glass shows her a face wan as her gown, and two great eyes that shine with an emotion she cannot suppress. How is she to meet her mother's guests to-night? Yet if she refuses to appear—he—*he*—will think——!

How *dare* he think at all of her? What insults he had showered upon her! But at least she had taught him a lesson. He had learned to-night a final one. She is glad in her soul that she had been forced *by him* (ah! there lies the justice of it!) into giving him his "No!" with such a cruel firmness!

Yes; there is comfort in this thought, surely!

Yet what a scene it was!

Falling upon her knees quite suddenly, she buries her face in her bed-clothes, and cries as if her heart were breaking.

CHAPTER XVI.

"He that loses hope may part with anything."

"Oh, death were mercy to the pain
Of them that bid farewell."

"REALLY to-morrow?—and at that unearthly hour?"

Sylvia Yelverton, opening her white and gold fan in a reflective fashion, looks across it at Felix with questioning eyes.

Dinner, the material, is over, and almost forgotten. Tea, the ethereal, is shedding its delicate fragrance through the drawing-room. Everyone more or less is toying with a little cup of egg-shell china, that looks as though a sigh might easily blow it and its contents into infinite space.

"Really to-morrow," returns Felix, smiling.

It is two evenings later, and now the last of his stay at The Chevies. He would willingly have gone the morning after his interview with Imogen in the library, when he had cast his all upon the die and lost; but he shrank from comment that would touch her as well as him, and waited in durance vile until he was enabled to receive that most blessed of all modern inventions for those in haste, a telegram summoning him to town.

Some people are dining at the The Chevies to-night: the Bohuns, uncle and nephew, Sylvia Yelverton, and one or two others of no account. Old Brown and Sir Hugh are playing chess on one side of the fireplace; Lady Olivia and Mrs. Brown are struggling with the intricacies of b  zique on the other. The young people are more or less scattered through the room. Mr. Bohun senior is helping Lady Olivia to win her game, and is talking kindly scandal to both the elderly women as he does so.

"Ah yes! and we shall miss him so!" says Patricia, who has overheard Sylvia's question and Felix's answer. "However, there is one last thing I can do for you!" cries she impulsively, rising to her feet. "Before sending you forth into a wicked world all alone and unprotected, I can at least give you timely warning of all that lies before you. I shall tell you your fortune?"

She seizes gaily upon a pack of cards. Phil Bohun wheels a little table close up to Felix; and Patricia, sinking into a chair on the opposite side of it from him, lays down her cards with an air of settled determination.

"Yes, you shall know all," she says. "'Forewarned is forearmed.'"

She shuffles her pack in a slow and mysterious fashion, makes some mystic passes above them, hands them to Felix with a strict injunction that he shall cut them with his left hand only, and then proceeds to spread nine of them face upwards upon the table.

"Do you quail? do you shrink?" demands she, regarding her victim fixedly.

"To say that I am totally unimpressed would be false," returns he, laughing; "but fear I di-own."

"Good!" says she. "Stout heart controls fortune."

"You speak rashly, my friend," remarks Captain Heriot, strolling up to the table, glass in eye, and fixing it upon Felix. "Allow me to say that if you only knew what ordeal now awaits you, you would confess to any amount of funk rather than endure it."

"Go away, Tom," says Patricia.

"No, my dear, not until I have fulfilled what I believe to be my duty. Not until I have warned this misguided young man of the hollow pit into which you would thrust him. Have nothing to do with her, Brown. She will unsettle your brain for months! You won't know whether you are on your head or your heels when she has done with you!"

"A fresh sensation is what all the world runs after. I should like to lose myself a little, even in the way with which you threaten me," says Felix.

"Are you prepared to hear all your most sacred feelings

publicly canvassed?" persists Tom, to Patricia's increasing disgust. "She will ask you questions that will bring the blush of shame to **your** cheek."

"Tom!"

"And will tell you many things that would be far better left unsaid. When she lets you go, you will retire to your room a crushed and broken man, with the mournful knowledge full upon you that all the ills that flesh is heir to are on the road to meet you, hurrying with winged feet."

"All this is because I once told you your fortune!" exclaims Patricia wrathfully.

"Once: never again, you will do me the justice to acknowledge."

"You didn't like it because what I told you came quite—*quite* true." To Felix, in an encouraging tone: "You remember," turning back again to the offending Tom, "what I said about——"

"Patricia," interrupts her brother hastily, "as I hinted, once was quite enough. Do not go over it again."

"But you must confess it came true," persists she warmly. "I told you the girl you loved would prove false; and two nights afterwards you went to that ball at the Silchesters', and Fanny, the eldest girl, would not give you so much as one dance all the evening. She deliberately threw you over, after all, for George Blount!"

Miss Yelverton is within a yard of him. "After all!" Tableau!

"Fanny! Pouf!" says Tom, contemptuously, trying to put a good face on it: it is rather a guilty face.

"It used to be '*Fanny darling!*'" retorts Patricia, mischievously.

She has not the faintest notion in the world of how things really stand between her brother and Sylvia, or she might perhaps have refrained from this damning speech.

As it is, the luckless Tom sinks into his boots as this last straw is so lightly added to his pack.

"But to business—to business!" cries Patricia, all unconscious of the storm she has aroused. "Felix, shall I

lay bare the future to you, or do you dread the consequences?"

"I have nothing to dread," replies he. He says it boldly, and with a smile, but there is a sad meaning only half hidden beneath his assumed lightness, that by one person in the room, at least, is understood!

Patricia, placing her fingers on her brow, falls into a reverie. This reverie is short. Then the fingers quit the brow, and run lightly over the nine cards as if counting them. At the seventh card she stops.

"You have loved!" she says, looking at Felix.

"True, O prophetess!" returns he.

"Open confession is good for the soul," says Sandie, sententiously. They have all more or less drawn round the magic table now. "Tell us who she is, Patricia; or if we know her, or what became of her."

"For details you must apply to Felix. I can give only the heads," answers Patricia dreamily; "only glimpses are accorded to me!"

"She does it awfully well, doesn't she?" says Sandie, making an extravagant display of admiration as he catches Sylvia's eye.

"Well, Mr. Brown, if we must apply to you, what *did* become of her?" asks Sylvia suddenly, prompted by some feeling that, for ever afterwards, remains unexplained even to herself.

"Of her?" Felix starts, as if a little touched or surprised, and looks at her absently. Then he recovers himself. "Oh, she threw me over for the other fellow, of course!" he says indifferently. He passes his hand over his forehead. "That is too old a story to be interesting," he goes on: "hear the true one. She didn't like *me*, and there was—well, yes, after all, that commonplace 'other fellow' *must* come in."

A rather forced laugh breaks from him.

"It sounds like the story about Tom's 'Fanny,'" remarks Miss Yelverton very calmly, but with a terrible look at the recreant, who is cowering beside her chair. He instantly commits the folly of trying to propitiate her with her anger at red heat. Into his eyes he throws the most abject denial of all unfaithfulness, and makes little panto-

mimic gestures to the effect that she, in her thoughts, is grossly wronging him. To all this mute eloquence, I need hardly say, she is stone blind.

"You have loved. You still love. You will love!" goes on Patricia oracularly.

"What—*another*. Oh, you base deceiver! Oh, you bad, *bad* man!" says Sandie, looking upon Felix with sorrowful reproach.

"No; not another," corrects Felix steadily.

"Ah! I like that," declares Sylvia, "whether you be in fun or earnest. There is nothing like *constancy*!" Here she casts a second withering look at Tom. "A heart that beats for *every* one would be no heart for *me*!" (A third awful glance.) "Where one loved once, one should love always!"

Here the recklessness of misery overcomes Tom. It occurs to him in an evil hour that by assuming ignorance of her meaning, and by putting on a bold front, he may yet win the day.

"I agree with you entirely," he says in a loud voice and with quite a buoyant air. Alas! his attempt at victory only ends in his annihilation.

"Do you?" says Miss Yelverton, turning directly towards him with wonderful friendliness. "Then we may all reasonably conclude that your heart is now, as it *once was*, in the keeping of your 'Fanny.'"

Who shall describe the immensity of the scorn that clings to that last word? There is no further effort on the part of Captain Heriot to keep his head above water: he sinks without a struggle.

"Constancy, Constance! What a pretty name that is! I knew a Constance once," murmurs Miss Brown, unexpectedly at this moment, in her high childish treble that suits so ill with her pale, shrewish face. "But, talking of Constancy, there should be a limit even to that, eh? Were a man to love a woman who despised him, how would it be then, Felix?" It would be impossible to explain the playful innocence of the way in which she makes this speech, or the callousness with which she watches the effect of it. "Should he still love on to all eternity?"

Felix grows deadly white.

"Different natures judge differently," he replies coldly. "To *me*, to love once would be to love for ever. True love knows no end!"

He leans back in his chair with a movement that would be passionate but for the restraint that he has laid upon himself, and in so doing he lifts his eyes to where, directly opposite, sits Imogen.

She is sitting on a quaint, old-fashioned *prie-dieu*, with her hands folded quietly upon her knees and her glance downcast. Her gown is made of black lace, which serves to set off the exquisite fairness of her neck and arms. She is quite near enough to have heard all that has been said.

Even as he watches her, slowly, reluctantly, as though compelled to it against her will, she, too, uplifts her gaze and looks at him. For a long time, as it seems to them, they so remain, steadily gazing into each other's eyes, as if forgetful of the world around.

Then a crimson blush, slow-mounting, shows through the clear pallor of her cheek—to linger a moment, only to die again, leaving her far whiter than she was, ere its unwelcome coming.

"White rose in red rose garden
Is not so white;
Snowdrops that plead for pardon,
And pine for fright,
Because the hard cast blows
Over their maiden vows,
Grow not as this face grows from pale to bright."

And from the bright back to the pale again, with a swift rush of shame that no self-command can quite conceal.

At this instant, *à propos* of nothing, apparently, Elinor laughs aloud. To most of those in the room her mirth sounds natural enough; but Sylvia Yelverton looks at her. To the latter, the suspicion that there is a vague touch of tragedy in the air has occurred. Does Elinor, with her meek voice and mousey manners, guess it too? And if so—Suddenly, Sylvia remembers the haughty dislike that Imogen has ever displayed towards the mild Miss Brown—the courteous but cold address to the unloved guest, the studied lack of familiarity. Has it all been borne in mind

by the apparently oblivious Elinor; and is this a small revenge? Even as she ponders over these things, Miss Brown speaks again.

"And would you then suffer scorn, contempt, all for the sake of the wonderful love?" asks she of her brother in a perfectly artless way, still smiling.

"All," returns he shortly.

"But scorn, contempt—why should a man feel that, because a woman refuses to marry him?" asks Patricia, looking up from her cards. "Must a man necessarily be contemptible because the one he fancies does not fancy *him*? Why, it is a silly thought!" She shrugs her shoulders daintily. "A man need not be a single whit the less charming because one heart in the universe refuses to beat in unison with his."

"Extraordinary effect the sense of power has upon Patricia!" remarks Sandie, glancing amiably around him. "It elevates her mind, and makes her truly eloquent. Here she sits, as you may perceive, with our fates within the hollow of her hand—that is, spread out upon the table, don't you know; it's all the same. I expect she feels just like one of those shocking old women of ancient days who sat upon a demoralised piano-stool, and went whirling round and round until they went out of their senses and foamed at the mouth."

"*Thank* you, Sandie!" says Patricia, with badly suppressed ire, who is indeed distinctly indignant at being compared to an old woman of any sort, be she Grecian priestess or otherwise.

"We have grown too serious over so slight a trifle as love is," declares Sylvia slowly. "After all, there is very little in it." A last cruel glance at the stricken Tom. "We are trying, it seems to me, to turn a jest into a tragedy."

"Oh! is it a jest?" inquires Elinor prettily. "Do you know, I thought all along we were discussing Felix's love-affair."

"Certainly not! It would hardly be in good taste to do such a thing publicly, would it, even if such a thing existed?" replies Miss Yelverton, looking at her through lowered lids.

"Tut ! it was all nonsense !" cries Patricia gaily. "A wordy war—no more."

"A worthy war is never nonsense. Collect yourself, Patricia," says Sandie with severity. "Think what even an *unworthy* war has cost the Government, and perhaps your unseemly levity may receive a check."

"I didn't say 'worthy.' I said *wordy*," protests Patricia angrily, who is a little annoyed at the solemnity that seems to have attached itself to Felix's fortune. "I wish you wouldn't be so absurd !"

"Ah, I see," returns Sandie, with a patronising smile. "Good—very good indeed—for *you* ! You are immensely superior to night ! Quite a play upon words, eh ?"

"Another low joke !" laughs Phil Bohun, who is standing behind Patricia's chair, and who evidently thinks that now it is high time to come to her rescue. But that dainty damsel disdains aid.

"Another slow joke, *I* think," she says, breathing undisguised scorn, as she lets her eyes light upon Sandie. Then she goes back to her cards again, counting them with Sibillic solemnity. "Ah, here is a disappointment," she says in a tone of unmistakable regret. She still regards Felix with a pitying expression.

"I told you so !" exclaims Captain Heriot gloomily, also addressing Felix. "She has done more mischief with those confounded cards than anyone knows except me."

"It is unfortunate," confesses Patricia humbly ; "but, see, there is money," touching another card—"yes, *heaps* of money !" There is renewed hope in her tone. "You will always be as rich as ever you can be !"

"Cheer up, old chap ! All is not lost yet !" says Sandie.

"Ah, but disappointment ; that is sad," murmurs Sylvia.

"And rejected love ; that is worse," whispers Elinor abstractedly.

"Anything more, Patricia ?" asks Sandie. "If so, give it altogether ; don't utter it piecemeal. If the poor dear fellow is to meet with an early and a bloody death, let us hear it without circumlocution. There are few characters

so entirely loathsome as those who insist on breaking to you your evil tidings."

"No; there is a long life before him, and—yes—*hope!*" cries Patricia, all her pretty face lit up with a sweet gladness. "Ah! that is better than most things. Perhaps—who knows?—that cruel *she* may prove a 'not impossible she,' after all."

"A royal marriage!" exclaims Lady Olivia at this moment, leaning back in her chair to regard her lucky cards and her adversary with equal triumph. Evidently the game of *béziq*ue is about to terminate in her favour.

"Hope is the common name for folly, and to be sanguine is to be accursed," says Felix, rising to his feet with a laugh. "Time has taught me all that; but it has *taken* time!"

"Checkmate," chuckles old Brown, who has gained the summit of his glory, and has left his adversary without a move.

Sir Hugh laughs good-humouredly, and pushes back his chair. More or less, all the groups break up; and presently Lady Olivia, looking lazily round her, misses Patricia. Perhaps she would not have missed her, had not a stitch in her knitting dropped. It is very particular knitting—a tiny pair of crimson silk socks for her eldest girl's son and heir.

"Where is that child?" she asks, looking placidly around her. Patricia is the child.

"She went into the conservatory a minute ago with Mr. Philip Bohun," returns Miss Brown slowly and distinctly.

"A malediction upon that girl's tongue!" murmurs Sylvia, mildly, who has overheard her, as, indeed, have all the others.

"Eh? What an imprudent act! The nights are so cold," says Lady Olivia fussily. Her motherly propriety is up in arms in a moment. "Imogen dear——" but Imogen pretends not to hear her. "Felix," turning hopefully to him (they have all, except Imogen, learned to call him by his Christian name long ago), "will you go and bring Patricia to me?"

"Ah, Lady Olivia, what is there I would *not* do for

you?" returns Felix, smiling, and looking down on her with his hands clasped behind his back. "But from this one duty absolve me, I pray you. Would you have me slain by cold looks, that you send me on such an errand?"

"Eh? What am I to understand?" asks she helplessly.

"Nothing," says old Mr. Bohun, who is standing near. "Let the young people alone."

He smiles meaningly, and Lady Olivia, a little overcome by this double interference, subsides into a thoughtful silence.

"And so you are bent on leaving us to-morrow, Felix?" asks Sir Hugh, coming forward here. "I can scarcely bring myself to believe it; you have made yourself so completely one of ourselves."

"But he will come to us again after Christmas. Yes, he has promised," declares Lady Olivia earnestly, who in truth likes him for himself alone, and would gladly have welcomed him as a son-in-law.

The promise had been made quite a month ago, and now Felix has not the heart to break it; yet in his secret soul he is determined that never again shall he put foot inside The Chevies.

Alas for the vows of men in love!—they melt like snow before the sun.

"But to start by such an early train, dear Felix!" says his mother. "It seems so foolish—so unnecessary."

"Perhaps not so much so as it sounds. I have business in town that compels my presence there at an unconscionably early hour. I have let it run to the very last; so go I must."

This polite fib is received most amiably.

"The best of such decisions as Felix makes," says his sister evenly, "is, that one can comfortably avoid all the last speeches and adieux that generally are so—er—very distressing. Sentiment is always tiring; and having disposed of it overnight, one feels that it is possible to commence the morning's journey free and unfettered."

"An admirable theory, but cold," remarks Miss Yelverton, softly. "I could not bear to leave a house where I had been happy without having some one to bid me

‘God-speed,’ and say how much he or she might miss me, or to wish me at least a pleasant journey.”

“There are two sides to every question,” puts in Felix somewhat sadly. “Taking Elinor’s view of the matter, you see one escapes bidding those final adieux that belong only to the very last moment, and cannot be got over sooner. Adieux,” sinking his voice, “that in many cases wring the heart.”

“Still they must be said, sooner or later,” persists Sylvia lightly, though tears have sprung into her eyes. In truth, she likes him well enough to be sorry for him, and is sadly grieved that his wooing should go so far amiss. “Confess, now,” she says, with an assumption of gaiety, “that you would always like some one to give you your breakfast and say a kindly word to you before starting.”

“Yes, I will confess to so much,” returns Felix thoughtfully. “But if one chooses to get up at such an abnormally early hour as half-past six, one must suffer the attendant penalties.”

“I suppose if one had a sweetheart, she would get up to say good-bye,” murmurs Miss Brown, with a little babyish laugh. “But you, poor Felix, you have no one, have you?”

(“I shall do something frightful presently,” says Miss Yelverton to herself; but in reality she does nothing, and only sits unnaturally still, with her hands clasped tightly together.)

Felix has again grown very pale, and into his large wistful eyes has come an expression of unutterable melancholy. One of those silences that at times are unaccountable has fallen on the room. Suddenly a voice breaks it.

Imogen has stirred slightly, and is now looking full at Felix with her lustrous eyes.

“I will give you your breakfast to-morrow morning, if you wish it, Mr. Brown,” she says slowly, in a calm, sweet tone.

Could a thunderbolt have fallen at Felix’s feet, it could hardly have astonished him more. She herself is perfectly unmoved; her features are as composed as though she had only said the most ordinary thing in the world, and not the most extraordinary.

An idea that he ought to say something—something that will show his appreciation of her graciousness—occurs vaguely to Felix; but it is not acted upon. Whether he ever said so much as a bare “Thank you” to her, for ever remains unknown to him.

As for Imogen herself, no sooner have the words passed her lips—the impulse gone that led her to destroy the sting in Elinor’s cruel little speech—than she repents herself of her deed. It is a folly, a madness, and has only served to give fresh nutriment to a passion that had far better have died through lack of sustenance.

Ever since that fatal interview in the library, she and Felix had lived and moved as though unheard and unseen each by the other—as distinctly apart, as though spheres, instead of so many rooms or feet, as the case might be, were separating them. And now, instinctively, she feels that by this last rash, unadvised act of hers she has again in a degree restored between them that old, if always formal, intercourse that had existed before his ill-judged declaration.

“I doubt you’ll have a horrid journey to-morrow,” says Sammie, who generally has something unpleasant to say, but whose prognostications now, however dreary, are received with rapture by two at least of the audience, as a means of breaking through a painful pause. “The clerk of the weather is at it again. It’s raining cats and dogs at present, and it’s as likely as not it will be doing just the same when you are starting in the morning.”

“Ah! bird of ill-omen! What! croaking again?” cries Patricia gaily, who has emerged from the dim, sweet, scented recesses of the conservatory, with a soft flush upon her cheeks that the flowers themselves might envy.

She seems prettily restless, in a sunny, happy fashion, and, going direct to her mother, kneels down beside her, and slips one arm around her neck. There is a little appeal, a little touch of new-born excitement, that longs to explain itself, in this tender caress. Yet all the time she looks at Sandie, and laughs and makes her saucy speech with a careless grace and an assumption of unconcern, as all women—even the youngest, the most unsophisticated—

will do, when their hearts are full to overflowing with some sweet knowledge that they fain would hide.

"Darling child! you should not have stayed so long in that cold place," murmurs Lady Olivia plaintively, feeling unable to deliver a sterner rebuke with that tender arm around her.

"I did not feel it cold, dear mother," returns Patricia softly.

* * * * *

Six o'clock has chimed slowly, sleepily, from the big clock in the hall. Hardly yet has the drowsy day woken from its slumbers. The lamps are lit in the morning-room at The Chevies, and a roaring fire makes cheerful what would else be inconceivably dreary. Upon the table is the breakfast equipage; upon the hearthrug stands Felix—waiting.

Alas! for

"The cruel life unsift that lovers lead!"

For *this* poor lover hope is at an end, and yet the pain still lingers. For him there is "no grace, no remedie," but only one abiding sorrow, that time, he now believes, is powerless to quell. He would, if he could, forget his soul's sad secret. Yet here he is waiting with tremulous longing for a foot upon the stairs, the rustle of a soft gown, the glimpse of a face that, when he sees it, will cut him to the heart with its cold courtesy, its but half-veiled unfriendliness.

He is watching for her coming, and yet he tells himself that when she does come it will avail him nothing. Far better would it be for him were she to fail in keeping her promise—if never again his eyes should rest upon her.

As this last thought, however, occurs to him, he starts as one might who is violently awakened, and an expression of pain unendurable contracts his face. To see her never again! Never! Oh, the cruelty of it! He will, he must see her again. And she will come! She has been cold, untender, but not *inhuman*!

How can he go from her without one poor parting word? Meagre as it must needs be, how can he leave

her without it? Last night he had given her no farewell. He had bidden her good-night calmly as usual, dwelling, with a joy that hurt him, upon the thought that on the morrow he should yet see her again face to face. And now, is even this last miserable consolation to be denied him? Has she chosen to forget—to alter her mind—to evade——

The handle of the door moving with a little creaking sound disturbs his vain grief. The door itself is opened by some hand from without. The hot blood rushes in a dark flood to Felix's brow, as he turns towards it, eager, expectant, all his fears forgotten. *At last!*

"I would like to wish you a good-morning, dear fellow, but I can't," says Captain Heriot, coming sleepily into the room.

A sense of kindness has driven him from his warm couch to see the last of his friend, but he feels that it is hard upon him—very! As for the friend, he is at this moment distinctly ungrateful. The shock of the disappointment he is enduring is almost too much for him, and it is in a strained, unnatural fashion he acknowledges the other's greeting.

But Tom Heriot is still too full of a fond remembrance of the slumber from which he was so ruthlessly awakened by his indignant man to notice the faults in Felix's manner. He is only sufficiently far aroused, as yet, to be eager to persuade himself that his presence in the breakfast-room on this frosty morning is but the continuance of a bad dream, and that in reality he is not awake at all, but lying within the embraces of his still warm sheets.

A word or two he mutters to the inattentive Felix, that means little or nothing, and then, instinct telling him he will fall into the fire if he doesn't rouse himself, he quits the room in search of something that couldn't be of any earthly use to anybody.

Once again, therefore, Felix is left to his own dismal reflections. Behind him the fire is crackling merrily; the lamps are as cheerful as though it were for dinner, and not for an early breakfast they are burning. One of the men brings in the coffee, and lays it with loving care upon the table. It seems the last act in the drama.

She is not coming, then ! Here is the sacrifice prepared, but the priestess, where is she ? Despair is fast settling down upon Felix. He makes no tragic gesture, no word escapes him ; but a grey shade overspreads his face that tells its own tale. Until now he had not realised how much he cared.

But whose step is this upon the polished boards outside ? A gentle touch once more throws wide the door, and, with a throb of exquisite relief, he knows that she at last is here.

Very slowly she comes towards him, pale, and slender, and wide-eyed. She is clad in some soft, clinging garment of a sad dove-colour, trimmed with silver fur. Round her white neck a loose piece of priceless lace is twisted carelessly.

There are dark circles round her eyes, and her face is singularly calm, and full of speculative thought.

"Have I kept you waiting ?" she asks in a little icy tone, glancing towards the yet untouched breakfast.

She gives him her hand, which he takes and holds gently for an infinitesimal period ; but speech is beyond him. At this moment it seems to him that, until now, he never knew the true meaning of the word "misery."

She looks so beautiful in those soft grey garments, with her colourless face and lucent eyes, and the long, dark, trailing lashes that throw such mournful shadows on her cheeks !

Watching her eyes only, one might say, "She is tired, sad ;" but her lips belie her eyes ; they are cold, silent inscrutable.

"My dear girl, what a charming costume !" says Tom Heriot, now returning in a state rather more wide-awake than his last. "You are as refreshing as the knowledge that this forlorn winter can't last for ever."

Imogen, gliding silently to the table, pours out the coffee. It occurs to her at this somewhat strained moment that she must have known Felix a long long time, because she has no need to ask him how much sugar he requires. One must really know a person to remember or care about that.

A poor pretence of getting through the breakfast is made by all, and then a servant coming in announces the fact that the dog-cart is at the door.

"So soon, by Jove!" exclaims Heriot amiably, who in reality has been expecting to hear of it for the last ten minutes.

He springs to his feet, and hurries out to see that rugs and all other things necessary to his guest's comfort are prepared.

And now, indeed, the last moment has arrived. Felix pushes back his chair, and Miss Heriot, who has grown a degree paler, rises to her feet. A step or two brings him to her side; a single movement possesses him of both her hands. He holds them in a grasp that in another hour might well have hurt her, but this instant is too full already to admit of mere physical pain.

Long time he looks upon her face, as one might look upon their dead, soon to be buried out of sight! Yet nought is unknown to him. It is an old study, too clearly printed on his heart to need a second reading.

"I know each shadow of your lips by rote,
Each change of love in eyelids and eyebrows;
The fashion of fair temples, tremulous
With tender blood, and colour of your throat."

All, indeed, is known to him!

Some words rise hurriedly to his lips.

"Think of me kindly," he says in a low tone, full of acute meaning.

"Kindly -yes!"

The words come slowly. Her eyes are on the ground.

"It is for ever!" goes on Felix in a low tone that speaks of a heart quite broken. "Say *something* to me before I go! -something to remember!"

There is agonised entreaty in his voice. His very soul is in it. For a time there is a silence so complete that it might be felt, and then she breaks it.

"Forget!" she says slowly, and as if with difficulty; but she says it.

He drops her hands and moves away from her. An expression full of agony sweeps across his face.

"Oh, love! How heartless!" he murmurs despairingly. Yes, if she could say *that*—and *now*—it is indeed all over! His voice, low as it is, thrills through the room.

In another moment he is gone.

Not until he has taken the reins from the groom does he discover that she has followed him. Looking back to bid a careless adieu to Heriot, he sees her standing there upon the stone steps, calm and still as ever in the chill of the grey dawn that is now coming to them across the hills.

"The first low fluttering breath of waking day
Stirs the wide air."

Night is flying on its sable wings; great Sol comes slowly up the eastern way; the sad remaining shades of a lost day still linger, and seem to cast a shadow upon that proud girlish figure in the doorway.

One hand she has uplifted to clasp the marble pillar near her; the other is hanging listlessly beside her. So she stands in that last hour, motionless, calm as a beautiful statue.

She makes him no sign now; but just at the very last—at the turn of the avenue where the laurels end, and the long stately line of the limes begin—he turns to take a final glance at the house in which his life's tragedy has been begun and ended, and then he sees that she is still standing in the cold dawn, and, as he looks, she lifts her hand and presses it convulsively to her lips!

Is it a silent farewell? He never knows. The envious trees hide her from him presently, and only the chill of the strange, sad morning smites on his heart, that already is chilled enough.

Throughout the interminable drive to the station he sees nothing but that slender figure on the doorstep, framed in by the stone archway, and clad in its neutral tinted robes; hears nothing, not even the wild sighing of the wintry wind through the bare branches, save only the slow, sweet voice of her who had bidden him "*forget!*"

CHAPTER XVII.

“It is difficult to grow old gracefully.”

“Delight is laid abed, and pleasure past ;
No sun now shines—clouds have all overcast.”

TIME has flown on eagle's wings since last I wrote. Christmas has come and gone. That visit of the Browns, which terminated two months ago, is almost forgotten. Snow lies thickly on the earth. The old people in the parish are all lying shrouded in their coffins, or else dying. Here and there the white ground is dotted with the forms of little birds that perished sadly overnight. The sky is dark with coming storm, and the breasts of all the Heriot folk are filled with dire alarm.

Once more a letter is the cause of their dismay. It begins this time with “My dear niece,” and ends “Your attached aunt, Araminta Howard.” It is addressed to Lady Olivia, who pales visibly on the receipt of it, and is from her paternal aunt, Lady Edgerton. It is rather a mixed epistle, lengthy, lecturing, but saturated all through with this assurance, that Lady Edgerton, in consideration of the duty she owes her family, has generously determined upon sacrificing her own pleasures, inclinations, habits, and self generally for the express purpose of bestowing them all upon her “dear niece” aforesaid for some time, the exact period not specified.

Lady Olivia, on reading this letter, sits down and weeps copiously. It is indeed a sad blow. Lady Edgerton is one of those dreadful people whom to entertain is to endure martyrdom and bitter humiliation. She is eighty-two (though it wouldn't be an act of wisdom to say so

before her), with all her senses acutely awake, and a most abominable tongue. To arouse it is to find yourself in the nethermost hell in five minutes: not to rouse it is a task that must absorb your intellectual faculties from morn to dewy eve. Few and far between are those who have accomplished the latter feat.

Her two special *bêtes noires* are Sir Hugh and Sylvia Yelverton—Sir Hugh, on the very strictest Dr. Fell principle, as never yet has the cause of her animosity towards him transpired, but that it does exist is very evident; Miss Yelverton, because of her *insouciance* and utter disregard of unkind comment, Lady Edgerton being much given to severe comment, and belonging to that class who take their pleasure in seeing those beneath their lash writhe vigorously.

Pride is the dear old lady's strong point; and seeing Imogen shows signs and tokens of this same trait, she has shown her from time to time as much favour as it is possible to her to show anyone, and has centred upon her most of her ambitious views for the furthering of the family honour. Indirectly she has hinted at making her her heir to all, or at least some of the moneys reported to have been amassed by her ladyship during a long lifetime—a report not altogether without foundation, as in excess of the fortune she had inherited in her own right, she has for fifty years being carefully gathering together for future emergencies or lucky heirs the greater part of a handsome annuity that fell into her on the demise of her husband, who died, poor man, at a comparatively early age, some said of scarlet fever, some of Lady Edgerton.

And now she is not only coming, but is positively already on her way to The Chevies to stay "for some time." The very vagueness of this date increases the horror of it. Lady Olivia, as I have said, subsides into tears, and the girls stand round her too aghast to offer even common sympathy. But all this doesn't prevent the ancient dame.

The catastrophe occurs in the afternoon of a cold bleak February day. It is a day that might have frozen a salamander; and Lady Edgerton, when she does arrive,

is distinctly pink about the nose. Her temper, however, continues warm. We should ever be thankful for small mercies !

She and her train sweep into the hall of The Chevies with an alarming rapidity, considering her ladyship's years and crutch. The train consists of one long-suffering maid, whose eyes are pale with weeping, one ditto man, one lap-dog, and one delapidated canary, rumpled in appearance, uncertain in colour, and hopelessly devoid of tail. On this last her ladyship lavishes all the sentiment of which she is capable. It is a melancholy *cortège*.

"The canary always means three months !" says Sandie tragically, as the miserable lot creep up the staircase, accompanied by most of the Heriot servants.

Patricia bursts into an uncontrollable laugh. Imogen, looking hurriedly at her, catches the infection, and laughs, too, from her heart, as she has not laughed for a long time now. The others join in, and mirth becomes universal.

"Ah, what is to become of us ?" gasps Patricia presently. "So very little of that shocking old woman goes *such* a long way. I confess I am not equal to the situation. Mr. Bohun"—to Phil, who has, as usual, walked over from The Grange, and is now enjoying the past procession as much as any of them—"suggest something. I will give you anything you ask if you will only get rid of that terrible old woman before to-morrow."

"Never play fast and loose with your conscience, Patricia," says Sandie gloomily. "Always say what you really *mean*. I'll explain for you, if I must. Take that old woman out into the snow, Bohun, and deliberately shoot her, and then Patricia will give you the Victoria Cross."

"Alexander, how can you talk so disrespectfully of your grand-aunt !" exclaims Lady Olivia, with an assumption of reproof that is somewhat spoiled by the broad smile upon her pleasant face.

* * * * *

For a week all goes smoothly. By laying a superhuman weight upon their tongues the whole family abstain from

uttering one word that might be termed offensive by this terrible old woman, and consequently—need it be said?—the old woman is outrageously angry. Argument is the bread of life to her; abuse its wine-cup: both the very breath of her nostrils.

Smothered hints and innuendoes have not been unknown. Unkind suggestions and comments have been numerous. In a covert manner she has inveighed viciously against the actions, the habits, the acquaintances of the entire family; but from *open* demonstrations of wrath she has abstained until to-day, when she chooses to make herself most particularly offensive.

To Patricia it is a day to be for ever remembered. It is Phil Bohun's last day. No final words have been spoken between them, but to the girl's guileless heart he is as much her only lover as though all the vows in the calendar had been distinctly sworn. He had come over to The Chevies rather earlier than usual, being full of the sad knowledge that now at last his happy time with her is at an end, and together they had sauntered through shrubberies and winter gardens, seeing little, hearing nothing save the beating of their grieving hearts. These gardens are most sweet to them: through them they had loved to linger during all their hurried courtship. They are very sad to-day, though there is some faint comfort to be found in the thought that to-morrow still holds a moment or two which he can grasp to come again to The Chevies and take a last look at her.

Slightly flushed and wholly miserable, Patricia parts from him until the morrow dawns, and enters the smaller drawing-room where her mother, Lady Edgerton, and Imogen are sitting in a ghostly silence.

"How heated you look, child! Like a frowzy milkmaid. What have you been doing?" demands her grand-aunt aggressively the moment she comes into view.

"Walking," answers Patricia, perhaps a little shortly.

"With that young man again, no doubt," grunts the old woman offensively. Lady Olivia flushes nervously, and looks up from her knitting.

"That young man!" I do not understand you. One

would think you were talking to your housemaid," says Patricia, coldly. She is feeling very sad at heart, and is longing very earnestly for sympathy; so that the foolish old woman's incivility grates cruelly on her somewhat overwrought sensibility.

"D'ye mean to tell me you were walking alone?" demands her grand-aunt, infuriated by this show of hostility.

"Certainly not: I don't mean to tell you anything," replies Patricia, defiantly.

"Olivia, d'ye hear that? Your *own* daughter, Olivia! Am I to be insulted, defied by an insolent girl like that?"

The old woman is trembling with rage, and pointing a shaking finger at the unmoved Patricia.

"Dear aunt, no! Patricia," in a low, pleading tone that goes to the girl's heart, "*were* you alone, or——"

"I was with Mr. Bohun," returns Patricia, calmly. She sinks into a chair as she says this to oblige her mother, and negligently untwists the black lace scarf that has encircled her neck."

"Alone!" exclaims Lady Edgerton, grasping her point with vigour—"alone without a chaperon! Is there *no one* to look after you?"

There is a double joy in this last speech. It cuts not only at the truant, but at the truant's gentle mother, who is looking at Patricia with tears in her eyes, and a little vague curve about her lips that speaks of a gentle conscience scourging itself with undeserved stripes.

"There is my mother," says Patricia, gravely. "I could desire no one better."

"Ha! I dare say, because she winks at your delinquencies," sneers Lady Edgerton. "I really think all decency and order are gone from the world. Society nowadays is widely different from what it once was." ("And a good thing too," puts in Patricia, but fortunately no one hears her.) "Even common propriety is a thing of the past. In my time a young woman would not be allowed, under any circumstances whatsoever, to be alone with a young man for even five minutes—to say nothing of hours! *Hours!*" cries her ladyship, belabouring the carpet

with her stick. It is plain that she has worked herself into an astounding passion.

"Dear aunt!" entreats Lady Olivia soothingly, rising to lay a trembling hand upon the irate arm holding the gold-knobbed walking-stick that is making such an inconceivable noise.

"Dear fiddlesticks!" shrieks the old lady. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Olivia! I say a young man and a young woman should not walk abroad together without being formally betrothed to each other, with the full consent of all parties concerned—and perhaps not even then—for *hours*! But you allow your girl, *my* grand-niece, to so demean herself without offering her so much as a rebuke! Olivia, the future has ever in it a punishment for the *weak*!" She transfixes her wretched niece with a glance, and again turns to Patricia. "I presume this—person—has made you an offer of marriage?" she says in stilted terms.

At this, Imogen rises as if to interfere; but Patricia, by a little gesture, forbids her to come forward.

"People in your time, Aunt Araminta"—she says with a queer little smile—"must have had very depraved minds, or else they did extremely odd things. People in my time are much more moral! Of this you have assured me by the very tone of your most absurd censure. If you can make mischief out of the fact that I took a simple walk with my—*friend*, I am very sorry for you, and I am glad that a century or two has rolled between your time and mine."

"You are an insolent girl," cries her ladyship, shaking her stick at her.

"I am an honest girl," replies Patricia undauntedly; "and I am honestly glad I did not live in the tainted days of which you speak. And to prove to you my honesty, I will confess that, though I *did* 'walk abroad' with Mr. Bohun unchaperoned, he has made me no 'offer of marriage,' as you call it."

Her face is very white as she concludes this defiant speech. For the first time, perhaps, it occurs to her that she might feel happier could she have given a different answer

But the answer, such as it is, satisfies one person at least. Lady Edgerton, to say the least of it, is triumphant.

"Eh?—eh? Ha!" she says. And this final ejaculation is as the snort of a war-horse. "So, indeed! He dilly-dallies, it appears, this fine gallant of yours, but fails to bring himself within the grasp of the law. Out upon all such recreants! says I. Where is your pride, girl? Men who put off the evil hour persistently, as he is doing, seldom mean anything. Doubtless, he is a gay spark, who, tired of the country's monotony, is agreeably whiling away his time in courting you, and will forget you quick enough once his back is turned."

Patricia is so choking with rage that she can find nothing to say. Lady Olivia, whose heart is bleeding for her daughter, is so afraid of her aunt that she dares not interfere. She is sitting a little behind the old woman, and she puts out her hand to Patricia with a gesture full of sympathetic affection; but she is now too nervous to know how to interfere effectually.

But Imogen, lowering the feather-fan that is shielding her face from the fire, turns slowly to Lady Edgerton. She is very angry, and her large eyes are flashing; but her tone, when she speaks, is the calmest thing possible.

"If you quite understand what you are doing," she says, "you are a very bad old woman!"

There is an awful pause, during which Lady Olivia sinks into her shoes, and Patricia, brightening, casts a glance of passionate gratitude at her defender.

As for Lady Edgerton, at first she seems electrified; but Imogen's voice is so gentle and so composed that it quells her, as it were, and reduces her to some kind of order. When at last she does burst forth, it is in the ironical rather than the aggressive line.

"Quite right, my dear," she says, with a shocking old cackle, pretending she is amused—"quite right! Insult me, by all means! It is the privilege of the young to ill-treat the old, and show them every discourtesy in their power. Go on! I'm used to it! This family," with a withering glance at the cowering Lady Olivia, "has been

educated to quite a fashionable pitch in that respect. Reverence for age is an old joke nowadays!"

"I assure you, my dearest aunt!" begins poor Lady Olivia, tearfully.

"I assure *you*, my good-for-nothing niece, that you have brought up your children in a manner of which you ought to be ashamed!" interrupts this charming old lady, with a rap of her stick upon the ground that makes Lady Olivia jump. "Thank yourself for it when in the future, as I foresee will be the case, they trample your feelings beneath their feet."

This sounds so like a prophecy, that Lady Olivia begins to cry silently, and is only checked by a warning touch from Imogen.

"Young men and women now are not what they were," continues Lady Edgerton, delighted at the open expression of pain that has followed on her words to her niece; "and I think" (magnantly) "that this young man in question—this Mr. Bohun—is as bad a specimen of the present growth as anything I have yet met with, which is saying a good deal. His manners are insolently cool; his demeanour insufferably self-possessed. He refuses to bow down before his betters."

The way in which she utters this last word plainly indicates that it is to herself she alludes.

"He is of the rising generation," she continues, with a disdainful shrug. "He has none of the well-bred diffidence, the courtly elegance, that distinguished the men of *my* generation!"

"That was a wonderful generation!" says Patricia slowly.

She lets her wrathful eyes rest steadily upon her grand-aunt, and the latter, seeing she has at last succeeded in working her into an overwhelming temper, smiles back at her benignly.

"He is not half good enough for you, my dear," she says, "even if he were in earnest, which I am pleased to consider doubtful. But whatever happens, even if you are to consider yourself forsaken, *I* will not desert you, *I*, my dear Patricia" (magnanimously), "am willing to receive you as my guest for a month or two, until you have

recovered from your chagrin. At my house you will be introduced only to those with whom you ought to associate, and you will gain, from constant contact with them, those advantages that this secluded country place could never afford."

"Your extreme kindness distresses me," says Patricia. "It is quite too much! You see, not being accustomed to anything better, I find this 'secluded country place' quite good enough for me. I thank you Aunt Araminta, but it is impossible that I should accept your invitation."

"May I ask why?" demands the old woman magisterially.

"Because," declares Patricia, rising from her seat, and losing all sense of decorum beneath the remembrance of the insults that have been showered upon her lover, "because there is nothing in the world to which I should more strenuously object than to spending two months in your ladyship's society!"

War now, indeed, with a vengeance!

"You wicked girl!" screams Lady Edgerton, shaking her stick at her, and quivering with anger. "How *dare* you speak so to me? Olivia, why do you not order her to leave the room? Am I, at my age, after all the sacrifices I have made for my family, to submit to the impertinence of a chit like that?"

She points furiously at Patricia.

Poor Lady Olivia has grown quite weak with terror.

"Dear aunt, she did not mean it," she keeps on saying aimlessly; "I am sure she did not—I know it. Did you now, Patricia? Speak, my dear, only speak and say something—anything! It doesn't matter what; only say it was all a mistake."

"She shall apologise to me publicly, or I shall leave the house," declares Lady Edgerton, with a baleful glance at the unrepentant criminal.

"She will!—I know she will! Patricia darling, tell your grand-aunt—for *my sake*" (this in low and hurried tones)—"how sorry you are for having spoken disrespectfully to her. Oh, Patricia!" (imploringly), "do apologise!"

"Apologise for what?" demands Patricia, throwing out one arm with a gesture full of eloquent protest. "She asked me to pay her a visit, and I declined the honour. She then inquired the reasons of my refusal, and I gave them. I do not see where the apology is to come in; but to oblige you, mother——"

She turns to the older woman, and makes her a somewhat elaborate curtsey.

"If it will in any way gratify you," she says to the irate dowager, who is still storming, "consider my apology made, and that I am, indeed, most honestly grieved, in that I have been the cause of your exhibiting such an ungovernable temper."

With this she escapes from the room, carrying away with her the last word—a fact that annoys her grand-aunt more than all the preceding warfare. She turns upon Lady Olivia immediately, and pours out upon her the vials of her wrath, which are filled, it must be said, with the most virulent abuse. That poor woman, being supported by her tears, which never fail her, after very considerable difficulty manages to smooth down the old lady's ruffled plumage and reduces her to a state that permits her to forget and forgive past injuries.

This happy "finis" is not achieved without the assistance of some of Sir Hugh's very rarest old port, bottled early in the beginning of the century. A very mollifying old port, by the help of which peace is completely restored, and immediate slumber ensured.

But for Patricia, hurrying down through the garden to keep a last tryst with her love, there is no peace. The "last hour" has now indeed come; and though never once has she deliberately doubted her lover's truth, still that little biting question of Lady Edgerton's, uttered the day before, has unwittingly rankled in her young breast, and, now compels her to feel shy and constrained, and vividly conscious of his presence. Why has he not made her that requisite offer of marriage? Her lids hang heavy on her eyes. It seems to her as though she can never lift them again to look with honest happiness into his. And yet how she longs to look!

They are down by the fountain, by this time, where the water-gods looked chilled and desolate, and hold icicles within their frozen lips. Bohun's sorrow has so swallowed up all the nervousness that has accompanied him throughout his courtship, that at last he has stepped over the little barriers that have hitherto divided them, and is holding her hands closely in a grasp that is almost painful.

But the girl sighs, and, whilst letting her hands lie passive within his, keeps her gaze steadfastly downcast. There is something in her silence—the deadness of her sympathy with the ever-increasing misery of his mood—that grates on Bohun's overwrought feelings.

"Patricia, what is it?" asks he, earnestly.

"Nothing," returns she; and as if to prove the truth of her assertion, sighs again desperately, and sinks into a rustic seat with all the air of one who has weighed the good of this world and found it wanting.

"I can't believe that," declares the young man, reproachfully, "when I look at you. Why won't you look at me? What have I done? How have I offended you? Speak to me, Patricia!"

"Ah! what is it that I can say?" asks poor Patricia, who indeed feels as if all things were coming to an end.

He is going; and perhaps he does not love her. And—and if that be so, why, what remains? Tears unbidden gather thickly in her eyes.

"There are many things you *might* say," says the young man, in a low, constrained way; "but, of course, why should you, unless you felt them? You might, for instance, say you are sorry that this is our last day together—our last day!" cries he, miserably. "Oh, Patricia, are you sorry?"

"Sorry? No!" exclaims she, with sudden vehemence.

She clasps her hands together with a sharp force, but refuses still to lift her eyes from the cold ground beneath her. Bohun is so wounded that he makes no protest whatsoever, but stands mutely regarding her, a great anguish in his eyes.

"Sorry!" she repeats again, petulantly. And then all at once her mood changes. The severity of her lips gives

way; they quiver sorrowfully. "I am not sorry—I am *broken-hearted!*" cries she, all in a moment, with a passionate burst of weeping; and forgetful of her dignity, his strange silence—everything, she flings herself suddenly into his longing arms, and sobs out her misery upon his breast.

"My darling! my beloved!" murmurs the young man, pressing her closely to his heart. "How I have wronged you! It was the thought that we must part that made you so strange to me. I know—I understand it all now; but for the time you crushed me. Dear love! there is one comfort at least before us: when we are married we sha'n't have to part any more!"

"Ah!" cries Patricia, disengaging herself in part from him, that she may the better look into his face, "say that again!"

"Say what, darling?"

"Why, that—that we are to be married some day."

"Well, are we not to be married some day—some day soon?" says the young man, bewildered and uncertain.

Patricia looks at him. There is mournful reproach in her eyes.

"Why did you not say all that before?" she murmurs sadly,

"That we are to be married soon?"

He is still wandering far afield.

"No: that you wanted to marry me at all!" declares she desperately.

Bohun changes colour.

"Why should I?" he asks, staring at her. "Didn't you know it? Can you tell me honestly, Patricia, that after all these long and happy weeks you *didn't* know it? Why have I come here day after day, except for your sweet sake? I thought you would understand. I trusted you! Perhaps," dejectedly, "I was wrong."

"Oh no! oh no!" sobs Patricia, who is now buried in her handkerchief.

"Then what is it? I tell you it never occurred to me that I ought to make you a formal offer of marriage."

"It occurred to Aunt Araminta, however," says

Patricia, emerging from the handkerchief in a somewhat damp state. "She has been behaving dreadfully ever since yesterday afternoon. She was abominable! She said you never wanted to marry me; that you were only amusing yourself at my expense; and that you would go away to-day, and forget me as soon as ever your back was turned. That will be in an hour!" sobs Patricia, sinking into the moist handkerchief again, and giving way to unconstrained grief.

"I wonder how you can waste so many precious tears over that old cat!" exclaims Mr. Bohun irreverently.

He has his arms round Patricia, and, all things considered, she is as comfortable as she well can be. But tears are a luxury to a woman, so she still weeps on.

"Oh, if you had only heard her!" she says, speaking as distinctly as the lapel of his coat will permit. (He never could wear that coat afterwards!) "One would think you were a convict, the way she spoke of you! If," says the younger Miss Heriot, speaking with solemn emphasis, "there is a detestable old wretch on earth, it is my Aunt Araminta!"

Again her eyes grow dewy, and her lips quiver.

"Darling girl! why should you take to heart what she has said?" exclaims Bohun indignantly. "How could such as she understand the perfect trust that belongs to such a love as ours? Yet you have been fretting about it—I can see that," turning up her chin lovingly and gazing into her distressed little face with deepest self-reproach. "Ah! Patricia! why did you let it go so far? Why did you not tell me that a public proposal was necessary? Why did you not speak to me about it?"

At this, in spite of her griefs past and present, Patricia raises her head, and, after a swift glance at him, gives way to wild mirth.

"To ask you to propose to me!" cries she; "to show you where your duty lay? Ah! it is too delicious! No, I did not get so far as that!"

"I wish you had," says Bohun fervently. "It would have been a much better arrangement than submitting to a stupid silence that cost you so many tear, my poor little heart!"

"It would be an original idea, certainly," declares Patricia, who is still distinctly amused. "I always fancied that you were different from every other person in the world, and now I know it."

"Well, that makes us a pair," replies Mr. Bohun, unmoved. "To my certain belief, there is no counterpart to be found for *you* anywhere. We must therefore pose before the world as two of the latest phenomena known."

"Phil," says Patricia, looking at him with a sudden terror, "where shall we both be this time to-morrow? Apart? How shall we live? What shall we do?"

"Don't think about that—don't!" entreats Phil, tightening his arms round her. "It takes all the good out of one! I shall come back soon. I shall tell the colonel all about us. He is a kind old fellow, and will help us. He will give me all the leave he can. And, meantime, I shall write to you by every post, and—you will write to me."

"I shall do nothing but write to you all day long. There won't be anything else to do!" sighs Patricia forlornly.

"And—and I suppose I had better write to your father too," continues Bohun nervously. "I'll—I'll speak to him if you like; but——"

"I only like what you like," interrupts Patricia faithfully: "and therefore I'm certain I'd rather write to him."

There are a great many more fond words and fonder caresses, and then at last the parting moment comes. They cling to each other, as young creatures will, with all the fervour of a first sweet passion; and then the final embrace is given, and with eyes too dim with tears to see, they kiss and part.

CHAPTER XVIII.

“Love is old—
Old as eternity, but not outworn :
With each new being born, or to be born.”

“There are moments when petty slights are harder to bear than a serious injury.”

THERE is joy in the breast of Lady Edgerton when she hears of the enforced separation of the lovers. In the heart of Patricia there is despair. But as into every misery there falls some grain of comfort, so to her comes, upon the third morning after Bohun's departure, a letter that fills her with happiness. How strange, how sweet, how perfect a thing is a first love-letter !

The handwriting is quite unknown to her, yet how thoroughly she seems to know it all at once. Whose should it be but *his* ? As it happens, it is the only letter she receives to-day ; but nobody makes any comment about it, even when it falls upon the breakfast-table with the heavy red regimental crest staring out in bold contrast with the snowy cloth. Her colour deepens, and then fades. With the most transparent little attempt at unconcern in the world, she takes up the letter slowly, and drops it into her lap, and there, where she cannot be seen, tightens her fingers over it in a tender ecstasy.

“Will breakfast *ever* come to an end ? She sits through it, however, without so much as one impatient glance, holding always the dear letter in a fond clasp, and listening to the conversation round her with an absent but very sweet smile.

Then comes release ; and with her treasure she is enabled to escape to her own room, there to read and re-read it

with ever-brightening eyes and gladdening heart, free from all curious glances.

But behind she leaves a growing tumult; Her grand-aunt, who, as a rule (a happy one! perhaps, indeed, the sole charitable deed in her life) never comes down to her breakfast, on this particular occasion had been prompted so to do. She had risen early, to spite the long-suffering maid (whose duties kept her up half the night); had come upon the ordinary inhabitants of the breakfast-room like a thunder-clap; had witnessed the distribution of the letters; had noticed Patricia's conscious look and blush on the receipt of hers, and had drawn her conclusions accordingly.

As the dear old woman never forgets an injury, and always manages, if possible, to repay it two-fold, and as that last speech of Patricia's, refusing the invitation to pay her a visit, still rankles in her reverend breast, she now sees a chance, not to be neglected, of improving the occasion.

"Olivia!" she begins solemnly, when her niece has duly installed her in the morning-room, in a comfortable chair before a roaring fire, and with the latest novel in her hands—"Olivia, wait!"

Lady Olivia, who had been making rapid tracks for the door, with a view to getting rid of her aunt for an hour or so, here comes to a standstill, and the conclusion that a bad time is before her.

In this conclusion lies the truth.

"Sit down, Olivia," says the old lady judicially. "You need not be in such hot haste to quit my presence. I *may* be distasteful to you—you show me that every hour I remain in this dreary house; but still, courtesy from the niece to the aunt is due."

"Dear aunt! if I thought for a moment that you——"

"Never mind *me*!" (severely): "attend to your more immediate household. It will give you plenty to occupy you. I feel convinced," says Lady Edgerton in an awful voice, "that rank deceit is prevalent amongst you!"

Lady Olivia turns pale.

"You will explain?" she begins faintly.

"Certainly!" Here this shocking old woman draws

herself up until she becomes as starched as her own soul.

"That girl, Patricia, is deceiving you!"

"Patricia! No," says the mother, regaining courage; "she is incapable of it."

"Ha! do you tell me that! Then you saw that she received a letter in the handwriting of a *man* this morning!—that she blushed over it—the blush of guilt!—that she huddled it into her pocket as soon as ever she could, and rushed with it from the room as soon as decency would permit."

"I saw all that, but——"

"You saw, and still kept silence; *you*, my niece!"

"Dear aunt——"

"Don't 'dear' me, Olivia! Confine yourself to *facts*. Tell me, is it possible that you allow your daughters to receive and open letters from gentlemen without first handing them to you for your inspection and approval?"

"If you would only try to understand——"

"Understand! How dare you talk to me like that, Olivia! Is my intellect gone? Am I an idiot? *Understand*, indeed!"

"I only wished to say, dear aunt, that in your time things were so different to what they are in mine, that——"

"In my time! What do you mean by calling your aunt an old fogey? D'ye think I'll submit to such impertinence? One would think you were a baby yourself! But you are *not*, Olivia. You are fast becoming an *old* woman; and so I warn you. I only hope that your irreverence to me may not be visited upon you through your children hereafter!"

Her manner so openly conveys the impression that her hope is distinctly *vice versa*, that poor Lady Olivia loses her calmness. Already predisposed to hysterics, she now bursts into tears. She has grown very unhappy. Though still trusting in Patricia, she now wavers a little, as her somewhat weak but kindly nature compels her, until she half brings herself to believe there is sense in her aunt's cruel words, and that she has signally failed in her duty towards her girls. Perhaps Patricia should have shown

her that letter; perhaps *she* should have insisted on seeing it. But the very idea of insisting makes her quail, and increases the flow of her tears.

"If you are going to make me a scene, Olivia, I beg you will retire," snarls her aunt, contemptuously. "You know how anything of that kind upsets my sensitive nerves. Really, you are without feeling. If you *must* weep over your shortcomings, pray do it in your own room!"

Upon this hint Lady Olivia rises and beats a hasty retreat to her chamber. Midway there she encounters Imogen, who, shocked by the sight of her mother's swollen lids, that speak so sadly of a wounded spirit, puts her arms round her, and at once discovers the cause of her grief.

"And if, dearest, you would only go to Patricia," sobs Lady Olivia, who has now drawn her eldest daughter into her room, "and—I don't for an instant doubt the dear child—but if you could only assure me that the letter is all it ought to be, I should feel so much better."

"You shall feel better in five minutes, then," Imogen assures her warmly.

"But I wouldn't have Patricia think that I seek to force her confidence," goes on Lady Olivia, holding Imogen back with a nervous hand as she would have quitted the room. "Remember that, Imogen. I have the fullest faith in her, and I know the dear child will show me her letter sooner or later; but I want to be able to say something that will satisfy your grand-aunt. She—she is a little unreasonable perhaps," says Lady Olivia, charitably.

"If you were anyone else, I dare say you would call her wicked," returns Imogen, calmly.

"Oh no, dearest, *certainly* not," declares Lady Olivia, the more shocked in that she feels the grain of truth in her daughter's speech. "But I can see that she is hard upon Patricia; and I want her to fully know how dutiful the dear child really is."

"Yes, I quite understand," says Imogen, who never permits herself to despise her mother's weakness, however strong she may feel herself to be; and after a few more comforting words, she leaves the room and goes in search

of Patricia, whose door she finds religiously locked against all intruders.

"Patricia!" she calls, gently knocking on one of the panels.

"Is it you?" returns Patricia in a low tone. Then the lock is cautiously unfastened, and Patricia draws her sister in, with a certain glad welcome that somehow impresses Imogen. "I have been so *longing* for you," says Patricia, in a little sweet subdued whisper that is yet full of exultant bliss.

"I fancied so. But I could not come a moment sooner. Mamma was with Aunt Araminta; and when she left her, she sent for me, and has been rather miserable about certain things that Aunt Araminta said to her——" She pauses.

"About me?" smiles Patricia, finishing her sentence for her. "I can *see* it all. Poor mother! Aunt Araminta's revengeful expression when I received"—a soft blush—"Phil's letter, was not lost upon me. She has been maligning me to mamma, and saying of me all sorts of things as absurd as they are untrue; and mamma is unhappy. There is little use in your trying to gloss over that old woman's defects, Imogen, because I know what she said as distinctly as if I had been present. She wants to compel me to deliver up Phil's letter, that she may pass the cruellest comments upon it; and I tell you honestly that the *rack* wouldn't make me do it"—she has by this time worked herself into a fine fury.—"He did not write for her eyes to see," she says: "he wrote for mine alone!"

"Do you think I cannot feel with you there?" returns Imogen quickly. "And indeed you wrong mamma, too, if you dream that she would have it otherwise." Then all of a sudden her tone changes, and she draws nearer to Patricia and lays her hand on hers. "Is—is it a *nice* letter?" she asks in a low voice.

"Ah!" murmurs Patricia. It is a sigh of deepest content, of purest love, rather than an ejaculation. Her expression changes as if by magic, and all her pretty angry face now breaks into an irrepressible smile.

Then comes to her the unconquerable longing to let a tried friend know her secret, and share with her its sweet-

ness ; to let some other one besides herself see how dearly she is beloved ; to hear some faithful voice declare how true, and perfect, and incomparable is this lover of hers.

"If—if you will promise *surely* to let no one hear of it, I will let you see it," she whispers softly.

"I promise," says Imogen earnestly.

Then in a moment it is in her hands, and she is reading it slowly, thoughtfully, and with a careful want of haste that endears her doubly to Patricia. The latter has drawn somewhat behind her, as though fearing that her fond blushes may be seen, but peering over her shoulders reads the loved communication to herself for about the hundredth time.

It is a very beautiful letter. Not exquisite in style or diction, perhaps, but beautiful indeed, because of the honesty of the love that breathes through it like the purest fragrance. There are little commonplaces in it, such as the assurance that he has written to her father by this day's post making a formal proposal for her hand, and that he cordially detests the place where he now is ; and that it had never before occurred to him how miserably long twenty-four hours could be, and so forth ; but every line of the letter, the whole spirit of it, is enriched by thoughts of her, and speaks of her alone.

Miss Heriot, as she folds it, is conscious of a sudden tightening at her throat. How good a thing it seems to her, at this moment, to be so beloved !—to have tender words folded up, and sent to one with the glad knowledge in one's breasts that somewhere the sender of them is waiting with fond impatience for other tender words in return.

Meanwhile Patricia is gazing at her with eager, expectant eyes.

"Is it not the very sweetest letter ?" she asks, innocently.

"The sweetest I ever read," returns her sister, tenderly.

* * * * *

"But she must be treated very delicately ; she must not be coerced," declares Imogen, an hour later, talking to her

mother. "Above all things, you must refuse to listen to Lady Edgerton's advice upon the subject. After all" (scornfully), "what can she know about love?"

"Yes; but she is terrible," says Lady Olivia, her eyes suffused with tears born of terror. "And how can one be sure that one is taking the right course? It is a great responsibility—seeing to the well-doing of one's children, I mean."

"Yes; there is always responsibility," acquiesces Imogen rather vaguely, "in every state, in every life——"

She pauses as though some perplexing thought has entered her mind. And as she so stands, meditating, her father enters the room.

There is a jaunty air about him that has long been to him a stranger, and his eyes are bright. There is a smile full of satisfaction on his lips.

"I have had a letter from that young fellow Bohun," he begins, airily; "quite a nice lad he always seemed to me, and—er—probably his uncle's heir. He seems very attached to Patricia. He writes me such a manly, straightforward proposal for her hand that—er—really—— But you shall hear it."

He fumbles a little with his eye-glass ribbon, and then reads aloud to them Phil Bohun's letter to himself. It is, indeed, all, and more than he has said. Sir Hugh waxes eloquent over it. Whether he would have been equally eloquent on the other side of the question, had the young man been without a rich uncle to his back, is a little matter of speculation that suggests itself to Imogen's wandering mind. At all events, he is pleased now.

"But the young people must wait," he says to Lady Olivia, pursing up his mouth, and doing the heavy father to perfection. "The young man, though—er—with good, indeed *excellent* expectations on all sides, is yet barren of anything very much beyond his pay at the present moment. And—er—one never can be *sure* how people will leave their money, you know—eh? Not that too much stress should be laid upon the money part of it either. There were better things than money; and the lad was charmin', very charmin'. But—er—they are both such young things

yet. Perfect babies, by Jove! And—er—it is always well to have time—eh? and when Bohun can sign himself captain, *then* they may begin to look at things in a nearer light. Eh?—eh?” and so on, *ad infinitum*!

Sir Hugh and Lady Olivia melting away presently, Tom and Sandie enter the library tumultuously, though on tip-toe, to besiege Imogen, and learn “what’s the row.”

“Well, isn’t she artful?” says Sandie, when they have heard all about Patricia’s engagement. “Of course, I knew she was playing up to him; but I never thought she would bring him to the scratch. He will be about the richest fellow in the county, if old Bohun sticks to him.”

“I do think, Sandie, that if you can’t be just to Patricia, you might at least refrain from vulgarity,” says Imogen coldly. If he were the ‘richest fellow,’ as you call it, in England, I do not think he would be in the least too good for her. *You*,” with a little short emphasis, “should think so too.”

“By Jove! yes. A good girl is a splendid match for any man,” declares Tom readily. “And there is something special about Patricia: she is so real, so thorough.”

“Thank you, Tom,” says Patricia, gliding into the room at this moment with something of the air of a conspirator. She looks nervously around her. “Papa and mamma gone?” she asks anxiously.

“Entirely gone. Come along in,” says Sandie, who is shamelessly unabashed by Imogen’s rebuke; “we want to know all about it. I suppose we’ll have to treat you with a certain respect now, considering you are half-way Mrs. Bohun.”

Patricia blushes hotly.

“Do—do *they* know?” she asks fearfully. Evidently she is alluding to the authors of her being.

“Yes; and they are so pleased; says Imogen quickly. “It appears papa had a letter from—from Phil this morning.”

It is the first time she has ever alluded to her sister’s lover by his Christian name, and her using it now seems such a sweet acknowledgment of the tie that from henceforth will bind him to the family, that Patricia darts at

her a glance of fondest gratitude. Yet, still some chagrin is mixed with the pleasure she is feeling. Her father has had a letter, too, from *him*; and she has not seen it! What right has he to receive one of *his* letters, and show it to all the world, and treat it very lightly, as it seems? One would think it was some *common* letter he had received! And to think it had been in the house for hours, and she had not seen it. Perhaps her father had flung it into an uncomfortable drawer, or was walking about with it *crushed up* in his trousers' pocket? Ah! it was abominable, she thought.

"I wish you joy, Patricia," says Captain Heriot.

"So do I, and lots of it, old girl," seconds Sandie.

"And if only to put us more *en rapport*, I'll confess to you that I'm in the same plight as yourself: I'm engaged to Sylvia," says Tom, who in truth has been bursting to tell it all along, and now is compelled to it by the knowledge of his sister's happiness.

They all exclaim at this news, and are in truth delighted, Sylvia being as dear to them and as familiar as any sister.

"How fortunate you are, Tom!" exclaims Patricia presently. "No one will dare say a word to you; but I seem to be beset with spies wherever I go. That dreadful old woman upstairs is putting mamma up to all sorts of hateful things, just because Phil didn't choose to dance attendance upon her from morning to night!"

"What's the odds?" says Tom tenderly. "You will be all right in the end, in spite of anything she may do."

"But if one is to be watched and condemned at every turn, whose life would be worth living? A French detective is a fool to Aunt Araminta! I declare," says Patricia gloomily, "if she is to remain here much longer, I would quite as soon be dead as alive!"

"Not a bit of it!" protests Tom gaily. "There's nothing like life, after all. We all say what you have just now said, once or twice in our time, but none of us ever mean it. We know we must die at last—that all our ingenuity won't get us out of it—and still through every direst misfortune we elect to live on, and generally manage to enjoy

ourselves pretty well, and get an uncommon lot of good out of the uncertain tenure that is allowed us."

"Just so. And fancy your letting yourself feel down on your luck because of that grisly old hag, Aunt Araminta!" supplements Sandie, with rather more force than elegance, giving her a kindly pat on the back.

This pat, being in a direct resemblance to the speech, reduces Patricia to a state of suffocation.

"Besides, why waste time over her?" goes on Sandie, ignorant of the fact that he has brought the charge of murder so close to him. "She doesn't consider the feelings of anyone. Remember that old man, her husband—Uncle Edgerton, I mean; why, she worried him into his grave!"

"Best place for him," says Tom, "snuffy old fellow!"

"He was always good for a fiver, however," puts in Sandie, "and——"

"And the brandy-bottle," interrupts Tom dryly; "it was all he cared for. When I remember him, I always think of that line of Goldsmith's—slightly altered—

"Man wants but little here below,
But wants that little *strong*!"

"Yet people used to call him a kind old man," says Imogen.

"Used they? Perhaps no one knew him as well as I did," declares Captain Heriot, with a shrug. "As I was regularly sent to spend my holidays with him at one time of my life, I should know. What a time that was!"

"I have always been led to believe by Aunt Araminta that he was one of the kindest creatures in the world," persists Imogen, opening her eyes.

"Our most exalted standard of virtue is, I acknowledge, pitched somewhat low; yet Edgerton, I do assure you, was a godly man!" says Sandie, turning up his eyes and imitating Lady Edgerton's drawl to perfection.

"He was a most confounded old nuisance!" returns Captain Heriot, mildly. "Perhaps, compared with his old woman upstairs, he looked pretty well in certain lights; but I can still remember the sting of his cane and the length of his abusive old tongue. My holidays spent

with him were one long right royal spank. School and the headmaster's birch were bliss after it. He may have been, as Imogen insists, a kind old man; indeed, no doubt he was. At that period of my existence it took me several days to *forget* his kindness. I couldn't possibly sit down without remembering it."

"Tom!" says Miss Heriot.

"The solemn, the penetrating truth, I assure you, my dear Imogen.' I would not exaggerate for anything you could offer me!"

"Well," exclaims Patricia, with conviction, "let him be the worst in the world, he could not beat Aunt Araminta. Something tells me," cries she tragically, "that she will effect a separation between me and Phil. She is bent on it! All day long she sits moodily silent, concocting the most cruel things to say to mamma."

Large tears gather in her eyes. As she grows melancholy, Sandie grows mirthful. There is, as we all know, an element of comicality about every love-story but our own.

"Muzzle her!" he suggests, with a badly suppressed chuckle, that ends in a violent fit of coughing.

"Don't injure yourself for me," says Patricia, regarding him with a mixture of reproach and disdain. "Laugh out, if you want to. But I confess I don't myself see what you have to laugh at."

"Look here, Pat! I'll see you through this, so don't make yourself miserable about nothing," breaks in Tom kindly. "I'll speak to the governor, and see that you aren't tormented by anyone. As for Sandie, don't waste your mind on him. He is too young to love anything higher than a jam roll, so he fails to understand you. It is his misfortune, not his fault, poor boy, and time will cure him. When the twenty-two low-spirited and wandering hairs now disfiguring his upper lip have become twenty-three, he will no doubt be in a better frame of mind, and will have learned to value at its proper worth 'the light that lies in a lady's eye.'"

"I like that!" exclaims Sandie indignantly, to whom his growing moustache is as a thing beloved. "I've a better moustache than ever you had at my age. Why, I

remember when you used to spend your entire allowance buying up the grease-pots in the barbers' shops, and——"

"Patricia, your father wishes to speak with you in his study," says Lady Olivia, entering the room at this moment.

As the girl rises, with a somewhat pale face, she goes to her and kisses her very tenderly, as though she feels a mute sympathy for the young love just springing into the fuller life. Long years ago this love was hers; to-day the remembrance of it smiles sweetly at her through her child.

Thus Patricia's engagement is publicly ratified, to the entire satisfaction of all concerned, save Lady Edgerton, who says as many nasty things about it as she can well manage, and persists to the very end, after all arguments have been exhausted, in the assertion that the girl is wilfully throwing herself away.

CHAPTER XIX.

"Family pride entertains many unsocial opinions."

"What is justice?—To give every man his own."

LADY EDGERTON having this standing grievance, all the Heriots hope that she will cling to it, and rest satisfied with it, and absolve them from listening to further grumblings. But this hope proves vain. The excitement that arises from making the world around her uncomfortable is not to be foregone for the sake of rendering thoroughly miserable one human being only. The dear old woman wakes one day to a sense of the duty she owes to her own special welfare, and seizes nobly upon an opportunity offered her by the luckless Sandie to render herself once more obnoxious to her people.

By a kind of unspoken but mutual consent, they had one and all refrained, in the presence of her ladyship, from the smallest mention of the Browns or their visit to The Chevies, their antecedents as merchants *purs et simples* not being considered such as could be safely betrayed to one whose aristocratic prejudices were a proverb.

It is about a week after the announcement of Patricia's engagement that Lady Edgerton wonderfully relieves the minds of her affectionate relatives by telling them that she intends to quit their house during the ensuing week. The news is received with rapture barely subdued. The whole establishment instantly brightens into life, even the very servants (all save the long-suffering maid) being touched by the unspoken joy that permeates through the entire family.

In a body, as it were, they determine to make the last

days of her stay agreeable to her—perhaps out of gratitude to her for going. And, indeed, all things have been so ordered, that probably she would have left them in as good a temper as the poor creature could assume, but for Sandie.

Unhappy—and, in this sole affair, innocent—boy, he alone had been unwarned about the Browns! When the others in a side-long fashion had arranged amongst themselves to suppress all mention of the merchant's visit, Sandie had been absent, and no one afterwards had remembered to drop a friendly hint to him; and, being born luckless, he, of course, was the one selected by fate to bring down fresh misfortune upon his family.

It is the Sabbath-day. Her ladyship, having been born near Edinburgh, calls it faithfully "the Sawbath," which always seems to carry with it great religious weight. She is always (in compliment to "the Sawbath") especially austere and disagreeable on that holy day.

The mellow light of the lamps does not soften her as she sits at the dinner-table, and slowly, as if in protest, partakes of her soup. Lord Clanbrassil had called during the afternoon—a crime, considering what day it is; but as he arrived armed with a copy of one of Dr. Cumming's works specially meant for her delectation, the sin was condoned. Clanbrassil is, indeed, a great favourite of hers. There is about him a certain placid, deferential way that never fails to propitiate even the most obdurate of old women. The conversation has just turned upon him.

"If," says Lady Edgerton, in a condemnatory tone, addressing Lady Olivia, and plainly alluding to the latter's sons and her future son-in-law, "all young men were as well-bred, as courteous, as intelligent as Lord Clanbrassil, we should be spared many discomforts in the present day. He indeed, has escaped all the contaminations of the period."

She is never tired of uttering alone these praises of her favourite, in the fond hope that it may raise angry reflections in the bosoms of her nephews. She holds him up in triumphant comparison with others of her acquaintance, not mentioning names, thus leaving it happily open to Captain Heriot and Sandie to apply her remarks to themselves.

To-night she is specially effusive on the subject of Clanbrassil. There is an unctuousness about her admiration that grates on Sandie.

"I consider it a most fortunate thing that, in this forsaken place, you should have, as a constant visitor, a young man so distinguished," she says, in her harsh, grating voice.

"Distinguished! How distinguished?" asks Sandie, as if athirst for information. "How strange, how melancholy, that he should have been amongst us so long without our discovering his fame! You know all about it, Aunt Araminta, evidently: do enlighten us! Is it machinery, or a new postage-stamp, or something in terra cotta?"

"If your manners resembled his, Alexander, you might possibly comprehend me. *No!*" exclaims Lady Edgerton, contemptuously; "such gifts as I ascribe to Clanbrassil have nothing to do with such vulgarities as inventions. Any common creature can invent. That, indeed, has been proved. But the aristocracy," says her ladyship, in a proud and boastful tone, "have, I think, been held singularly clear from this accusation throughout many generations. It is permitted to the lower classes to monopolise work of all kinds. A merciful arrangement, I think, as a gentleman, of course, requires nothing but good manners.

"I see," says Sandie, thoughtfully; "it sounds like an advertisement, doesn't it? 'Wanted, a gentleman; brains no object: an elegant deportment alone required.'"

Lady Edgerton, who never quite understands Sandie, gazes at him with a piercing eye, and Sandie looks back at her with a glance full of conscious innocence. He wins the day. Her ladyship, baffled, removes her gaze from him, to fix it on his mother.

"When, my dear," she asks, "did you first become acquainted, in this out-of-the-way place, with Lord Clanbrassil?"

Unfortunately, Lady Olivia's memory being never of the best, she now pauses to give a truthful answer to the question. It is impossible for her on the spur of the moment to remember when she first met that uninteresting young man.

Whilst she puzzles her brain to recall the night when he had dined with her in company with the Deverills, Sandie, with a view to assisting her, says very distinctly :

"Just about the time the Browns came here. Don't you remember, mother?"

He says it blithely, feeling as if he had helped his mother out of a difficulty, instead of getting her into one, and then goes on with his fish, blissfully unconscious of the horrible mischief he has done.

"The Browns!—the *Browns!*" says Lady Edgerton, with an awful stress upon the plebeian name. "Who are they? Why is it I have never heard their names mentioned before?"

Dead silence follows upon her question. Though considerably aged, Lady Edgerton has lost none of the perspicuity that had signally characterised her in her early youth. Looking up now sharply, first to the left and then to the right of her, she overtakes an agonised glance sent from Lady Olivia to Imogen, and at once is mistress of the situation.

Once more she turns her keen, searching old eyes on the unsuspecting Sandie.

"And who," she asks, in a tone marvellously mild for her, "may these Browns be?"

"A question!" returns Sandie, shrugging his shoulders and laughing. "But uncommonly nice people all the same, I can assure you. Old Brown went in for cotton, I believe many years ago, and made his pile so, and the others have been reaping the benefit of it ever since. A very satisfactory crop, I should say, eh?" turning to his father.

"Perhaps—no doubt: it hardly matters," responds Sir Hugh, confusedly. "Tell your aunt about that run we had yesterday. It will interest her far more than the present subject, which is strange to her."

"Strange things have their value," says the old lady tersely. "Variety, as you know, Sir Hugh, is always charming. Go on, my dear Sandie: your account of these new friends of yours is very interesting. These—*cotton* people!"

"Pooh!" returns Sandie, laughing, and not seeing the

despairing glance his mother is casting at him—a glance however, not thrown altogether away, as Lady Edgerton catches it, and makes her own of it for future use in the twinkling of an eye—“if you only saw them, you would forget the cotton entirely. The trademark was obliterated long ago. Clanbrassil, whom you are so fond of, isn’t a patch on Felix Brown in any way. *He* has distinguished manners, if you like!”

It is enough! The terrible truth is out.

“Oh, indeed!” says Lady Edgerton, with an eloquent sniff; and after that relapses into a stern silence.

“She’s mad at having her favourite disparaged,” thinks Sandie to himself, with an artful chuckle; but happening to raise his eyes at this moment, he meets, for the first time, his mother’s reproachful glance and Patricia’s angry one, and discovers at last what a thorn in the flesh he has been to his family for the past ten minutes.

A most miserable hour ensues, prolonged by Lady Olivia, who knows there is nothing to follow it but a worse hour in the drawing-room. At last, when with decency she can no longer delay, she rises from her seat, and retires with her aunt and the girls, leaving the happier sex to the discussion, merely, of their wine.

There is a grand fire in the drawing-room as they enter—a fire that roars and crackles and smells of jollity and good-humour—a fire that might, indeed, have melted the temper of Xantippe, but it fails with Lady Edgerton.

Her niece, pushing forward a delicious armchair, full of softest cushions, and breathing of slumber, with a view to propitiating her, is rudely repulsed.

“If that is meant for me, Olivia, pray spare yourself the trouble. I never sleep after dinner as you know. I am not in my dotage yet, thank Heaven. I know *all* that is going on around me. Imogen, hand me that chair near you!”

Imogen obeys in silence, feeling that a crisis is at hand. It is, indeed, closer even than they imagine.

Her ladyship has scarcely sunk with a groan of disgust into the extremely uncomfortable and hard-backed chair her temper has chosen, than she gives way to the spleen that has been consuming her throughout dinner.

"Olivia," she begins, turning upon her unhappy niece, "is this thing true that I have heard?"

"What thing, Aunt Araminta?"

"Don't prevaricate!" exclaims Lady Edgerton fiercely, bringing down her gold-headed stick with a vehement thump upon the ground. "I warn you it is best to be open and above-board with *me*. Speak the truth, Olivia! Is it possible that I must believe you have had the family of a *cotton-merchant* here, on equal terms of intimacy with your sons and daughters?"

Poor Lady Olivia, feeling herself a child once more, and in the deepest disgrace, with the forlorn chance before her of being either whipped or put in the corner for the day by her sour-visaged aunt, crosses and uncrosses her soft white hands upon her lap, and looks with imploring helplessness at Imogen; and Imogen looks straight into the fire.

"They were friends of Sir Hugh's," Lady Olivia ventures at last, in a subdued whisper.

"Then they *were* here?" ejaculates the old woman in an awful tone.

"Yes, for just a little while," temporises Lady Olivia nervously.

"I did not think I should live to hear such an acknowledgment from your lips. An *hour* beneath your roof was sufficient. They can boast of it amongst their low acquaintances all their days. You have disgraced your family; you have made me feel thoroughly ashamed of the fact that I am still your aunt.

It would be impossible to convey on paper the loftiness of the manner that accompanies this irate speech. An eloquent silence follows it—profound as it is eloquent—a silence that to Patricia means agony, as it is by a super-human effort alone she keeps herself from breaking into open, ringing laughter.

The whole scene is so irresistibly comic! Lady Edgerton stiff, rigid, swelling with outraged pride upon a chair hard and severe enough to have satisfied an anchorite; Lady Olivia in the last stage of fear and depression, scarcely knowing whether to cry or remonstrate; and Imogen, for some strange reason unexplained, determinedly silent.

The latter might indeed be cut in stone, for all the emotion she shows, or consciousness of the comedy being enacted before her.

"Patricia, my smelling-salts!" says the dowager at last, in a commanding voice.

"Would you wish for some Eau-de-Cologne, Aunt Araminta?" asks Patricia, bending solicitously over her. "It is such an excellent cure for—for things of this sort!"

"What things?" sharply.

"The spleen!" murmurs Patricia artlessly, "for one thing. And—do try it—it may cure you!" She makes a little mischievous *moue* at Imogen over her grand-aunt's irreproachable lace-cap. "I'll get it for you in no time," she says.

Lady Edgerton, beyond giving way to an angry snort, takes no notice of this considerate offer. Once again her whole attention is given to the crushing of the unfortunate Lady Olivia.

"I always felt Hugh was a Radical," she says; "now I know it. All his desires and tendencies are distinctly low. But for that I scarcely blame him. The Heriots, so far as I have ever learned anything about them, have always been men of very loose opinions, and perpetually on the verge of bankruptcy."

Lady Olivia starts violently, and the colour dies from her face.

Patricia, who happens to be looking at her, sees this.

"At least do my father the justice to remember that he betrayed no low tendencies when he chose my mother for his wife," she says, with a sudden little touch of haughtiness that sits very funnily but very sweetly on her.

Imogen, withdrawing her eyes slowly from the fire, lifts them to her sister's face.

"Is it worth while?" she asks in a low tired tone. "Is defence necessary?"

She waits for no answer to her words, but goes back to her immovable contemplation of the glowing coals.

"You are an impertinent girl!" exclaims Lady Edgerton furiously, looking at Patricia with her fierce old eyes aflame.

"If your mother were not the weak fool she is, she would order you to your chamber until you sought and found a better frame of mind. Be silent, girl, I desire you! The honour of your family is at stake. What! are Tom, Dick, and Harry to be admitted nowadays into one's private circle, and no protest to be made? Out upon the thought! say I. Be led astray, if you all will, by this detestable Government that would make all men equal, even against the spoken decrees of God; but do not hope to get *me* to join your ranks. As long as the earth holds together, there must be classes and classes. There can be no such thing as a universal equality."

"Dear aunt, I beg you to try and understand that we do not——"

"Hold your tongue, Olivia! I *will* speak! That Sir Hugh was ever wanting in proper dignity I knew; but that he could invite within the sacred precincts of his home those connected with trade—*trade*!—was a crime of which even I, who knew him, never believed he could be guilty! My wildest flight of imagination never reached so high as that! And you, Olivia! Are you a nonentity, or what, that you stood tamely by, and permitted such proceedings to take place within your doors? How could you allow such low, vulgar creatures to associate with the members of your household?"

"They were not at all vulgar," poor Lady Olivia puts in, in a quaking tone.

"They were!" declares her aunt, indignantly; "you know they were! How could they be anything else? *Browns*!—people without a drop of blood in their bodies! How dare you say they weren't vulgar? Do not try to excuse your outrageous conduct by endeavouring to throw a halo of respectability round such impossible people. Alexander spoke of a son. Was he the sort of person to be thrown in the way of your daughters?—to aspire, perchance, to the hand of one of them? Imogen, I appeal to you, as the only well-minded individual in this house; what was your honest opinion of this Mr.—*Brown*?"

Oh, the contempt of her tone, as the ill-bred name escapes her!

A little shade crosses Imogen's face—just the faintest quiver of an irrestrainable emotion. It is so faint, that almost they who watch her imagine it to be but the pale flickering of the firelight that every now and then springs into flame only to die away again, leaving its shadows behind it. Even Patricia grows intensely grave as they wait for the answer required; and Lady Olivia's frightened blue eyes fasten themselves anxiously upon the still face of her eldest daughter, though without the smallest hope that anything she will say will be favourable to Felix.

Imogen's long dark lashes tremble slightly, and her colour fades in a degree, as she turns to Lady Edgerton; but her voice is so composed as to be almost indifferent.

"I think that in bearing, appearance, and manner he was most unmistakably a gentleman," she says very slowly; "and, with that, the gentlest, the truest man I have ever met!"

She turns away again to her old position. Her manner is so calm, that it leaves a little hush behind it when she ceases speaking. Her hands lie passive on her knees. She appears already forgetful of the part she has taken. It is only Patricia who notices the deadly pallor of her lips.

As for Lady Edgerton, she is struck dumb with angry disappointment; she is unpleasantly astounded. She has built on Imogen, as it were, and lo! the foundations have proved rotten. No language in the world could express her astonishment and disgust, or her open indignation.

Her astonishment, at all events, is equalled by that of Patricia and Lady Edgerton. *Their* surprise and content is perfect. They had, in their wildest moment of hope, imagined Imogen as being neutral on the subject of Felix; but to have her stand out before her grand-aunt his very champion, as it were, fills them with a sense of triumph.

This visible air of victory that now distinguishes them drives the exasperated old woman to the verge of lunacy. She turns upon Imogen, and pours out on her the vials of her wrath.

"You have to-night made me acquainted with quite a new phase in your character," she says in a withering tone.

"It is, I confess, a shock to me. I thought at least I might have counted upon *you*. But you too are a Heriot. And as I now find there is not a living soul in this house with whom I have an idea in common, I feel that the sooner I leave it the better. I shall therefore increase the speed of my departure; and I beg you all to take notice that I quit this most uncongenial circle on Wednesday next!"

This terrible announcement she gives forth with all the air of one who knows she is about to strike fear and consternation into the breasts of her hearers. And, indeed, in Lady Olivia it awakes mingled feelings of terror and joy; but, so far as Patricia and Imogen are concerned, the joy reigns supreme.

Lady Olivia, attempting a feeble remonstrance, is sternly silenced; and on the Wednesday decreed the old lady, bag and baggage, departs from The Chevics, much to the relief of those she leaves behind her—"Never to return, if I can help it," mutters Sir Hugh on the doorstep, whilst waving her a courteous adieu.

CHAPTER XX.

"There are chords in the human heart—strange varying strings—which are only struck by accident."

"Haste is needful in a desperate case."

PERHAPS there is hardly anything so melancholy, so depressing, as to find one's self beloved where there is no chance that we can return that love. To Imogen comes very slowly the certainty that whatever Clanbrassil may be to her, she is all the world to him. This knowledge, when it arrives, proves not only perplexing but disheartening. She shrinks from it at first, but time and circumstance compel her to face it.

Lord Clanbrassil has become now a daily visitor at The Chevies, and no rebuffs from her, no coldness, no petulant actions seem to have the power to turn him from the path he has laid out for himself. All the little delicate slights she showers upon him through a purely conscientious motive fall short of the mark intended. Clanbrassil, like a faithful animal repulsed, only attends all the more assiduously to the wants of her who is his chosen mistress.

Patience, assisted by perseverance, will, we all know, in time conquer the world. Clanbrassil, whose patience is infinite, and who is of a somewhat dogged nature, following up his slow but sure tactics, in process of time so far conquers Imogen that in a measure he becomes necessary to her; so much so, that by fine degrees the petty slights grow more and more transparent, until at last they fade out of all recognition, and in their places comes a calm sweetness and a subtle friendliness that ever enlarges and increases, until it raises within the breast of Clanbrassil a false hope that is crueller than all that has gone before.

It draws him with a wicked, laughing glee to the end. Just before the welcome departure of Lady Edgerton, when all their minds were centred upon her going, he came up one day to The Chevies, and meeting Imogen in the shrubbery, asked her to be his wife then and there. He was refused—then; but as hope springs eternal in the human breast, and as Englishmen do not know when they are defeated, this blow, that might have for ever silenced another man, only helped Clanbrassil to a determination to woo her persistently until either she surrendered, or some more fortunate suitor was accepted by her.

Just about that time too, Sir Hugh's affairs were discovered to be in a knot that there was no untying. For the past two months he had been greatly harassed, endeavouring to find the ways and means to ward off public ruin.

The inevitable days of reckoning were crowding rudely down upon him, and all the plans and theories he had worked out of his fertile brain had been pooh-poohed and looked down upon by his man of business as being utterly impracticable.

Nothing less than the instant possession of a large sum of money—and that to be written in five figures—could possibly save him from open discredit and bankruptcy. How to procure this money was the difficulty—a difficulty past all surmounting unless somebody could be induced to come forward, who, for the sake of pure friendship, would consent to lend it for an indefinite period, trusting to a second generation for repayment. *Such* a friend is hard to find!

* * * * *

The February afternoon has closed in very suddenly, and already night with its myriad terrors is creeping towards the earth.

“A mighty wind,
Not like the fitful blast, with fury blind,
But deep majestic—”

has risen to desolate the woods: and faint mutterings of distant thunder tremble through the halls and corridors.

Imogen, crossing the picture gallery on her way to her

mother's room, is stopped by a servant with the intelligence that Lord Clanbrassil is in the drawing-room.

"He asked for you specially, Miss Heriot," says the maid. "Will you go to him whilst I inform her ladyship of his arrival?"

It has become such a usual thing—his daily visiting—that the servant feels no awkwardness in saying this.

"No," returns Imogen calmly; "I am too busy just now. But as I am on my way to my mother's room, I will tell her myself of Lord Clanbrassil's arrival."

Something in the girl's assured tone, she hardly knows what, has annoyed Imogen, and sent the clear, warm blood surging to her face. Why should it be thought that *she* is the one to receive him? Why not Patricia?

She has paled again before she reaches her mother's door, where she stops short, attracted by the sound of subdued voices within. She opens it quickly, only to find no one there, and to discover that the sounds she had heard had come from her father's dressing-room beyond. The voices, to have reached her on the corridor, must have been loud. She is made the more sure of this by the fact that, as she crosses the bedroom, the tones that before were muffled now grow distinct, and form themselves into words.

"If this money is not procured without delay, nothing but the most dishonourable and complete ruin lies before us," Sir Hugh is saying in a voice made clearer by mental dismay. "You object to my plan: suggest another, if you can."

"No, no; I do not object *now*"—Lady Olivia's voice sounds crushed and broken—"borrow this money from Mr. Brown, if it must be so!"

"Mr. Brown!" Imogen staggers backwards, and might have betrayed herself had she not caught at the back of a massive carved chair against which she leans.

"Still, you *do* object!" says Sir Hugh half angrily.

"No, dear. I—I am only sorry that, as this thing has to be done, we ever invited them here. It looks so much, don't you see, as if——"

She breaks down ignominiously.

"I invited old Brown. I am not going to ask him; he has his family to see to. But Felix—he has more money than he knows what to do with. A young fellow like that cannot want it just at present, and I can give him as good interest as another. I will give him even better, if he desires it," says Sir Hugh magnanimously. "I never stick at a trifle of that sort. And—and it will be all right later on, you know—eh? We can retrench a bit! And Tom, when he marries Sylvia, will be a good mark—eh? D'ye know," exclaims he quite gaily, "it seems to me that young Brown, in the long run, will be having rather the best of——"

He stops abruptly, and stares somewhat vacantly at the door, or rather at the strange vision that stands on the threshold of it.

Imogen surely! but so pale, so strange! The girl is standing motionless, gazing at him with a curious horror in her eyes, and with her hands so tightly clasped before her that the tender knuckles show only a dead white.

As yet, her thoughts have hardly classed themselves, but one certainly rings through her brain. They are going to ask him, *Felix*—he whom she had spurned and rejected—for *money*! Oh, the anguish! the shame! the unspeakable disgrace of it!

She draws her breath with a sudden fierceness, and then she recovers herself and sweeps like a whirlwind into the room.

"I have heard you," she says, passing her mother and going straight up to her father. "I was coming to you through that outer room, and I heard all. All! It is *impossible* that you should do this thing! By what right do you intend to ask this Mr. Brown for money?—him, of all men! What claim have you upon him?"

She is trembling from head to foot, but not through fear.

"You mistake!" says Sir Hugh, who is always a little bit afraid of her. "It is but a loan I speak of."

"I do *not* mistake!" she breaks out passionately. "I understand fully—only too well. You speak of a loan. When, then, do you dream of repaying it? In a month, a

year, or is it *never*? Why, it seems only yesterday that you told me you could never hope to see the day the estate would retrieve itself. This is not a loan, then; it is a mere beggarly demand for money!"

"Imogen!" exclaims her mother, rising pale and horrified to her feet.

"It is too late for silence, for a miserable shrinking from unpalatable truths!" cries the girl in a low but vehement tone. "I ask you, is it honourable, is it *honest*, to borrow when we know we cannot repay?"

"Something must be done," says Sir Hugh feebly, "or else we must starve."

"Then let us starve," firmly. "Far better do that than live contemptibly on the bounty of other people. We can work for our daily bread, as others have done before us. We may be poor; we need not necessarily be dishonest!"

Lady Olivia turns quickly upon her, her gentle eyes ablaze.

"How dare you speak so to your father!" she cries in a high clear tone, going nearer to Sir Hugh, and laying her hand upon his arm as though to protect him. "You altogether forget yourself, it seems to me. Are you—his child—to be the one to dictate to him of what is right or wrong? Is he not your *father*? Ah! is it because in all your life he has never left you with a wish ungratified that you now, in his hour of need, fail in respect and love to him?"

It is the first time she has ever rebuked Imogen, and her whole frame quivers with the unwonted agitation.

But Sir Hugh, who is looking suddenly a little old and broken, puts up his hand to check her further speech.

"Do not accuse her too harshly," he says, in a very low tone. "She is right. I have come very low indeed when I, a ruined man, thought of seeking assistance from my friends."

But Lady Olivia is still too bitterly wounded to be silent.

"And *you*, ungrateful girl that you are, why should you be the one to cast even the shadow of shame upon

your father?" she goes on with angry reproach. "How have you found a voice to speak at all upon this matter?—you, who might have saved him by putting forth your hand. Yet you would not! Had you married Felix——"

"Hush, Olivia!" interposes Sir Hugh, hastily. "We have had enough of it; I will hear no more. Thinking it all over of late, I cannot see what just reason we had for expecting Imogen to sacrifice herself for her family. It was a miserably selfish idea. If I *am* to be beggared in my old age"—with a wretched attempt at a smile—"the sooner it comes to pass the better. I have heard it is not altogether so unbearable as one might imagine, living in one of those French towns, or in Brussels, or somewhere abroad."

His head droops upon his breast. He seems to have grown in one moment greyer, more feeble. His assumed bravery altogether deserts him. His attitude is suggestive of nothing but the very deepest despair.

"Ah, Hugh, do not give way like this!" exclaims Lady Olivia, miserably. She throws her arms round him, and clings to him with all the love of her youth that never yet has grown cold. To her at this unhappy moment he is not the old man, the father of her children, but once again the husband of her girlhood—her gay, handsome, gallant young lover. To see him now so crushed and broken is terrible to her. She lays her head upon his shoulder and begins to cry softly but very piteously.

Imogen has fallen back from them. It seems to her that no longer has she a place with them. They have forgotten her in their grief, their love. A terrible pain grows within her heart until it reaches gigantic proportions, and threatens to overcome her. Is she, indeed, the cause of all this cruel suffering? Is it through that one act of hers that sorrow has fallen like a cloud upon the declining years of her father, her mother?

The agony is getting too great to be borne. At length it conquers her. She flings from her all hope, all self-respect, all freedom in one wild instant, and going to her mother's side falls upon her knees before her.

"Mamma," she says in a low but terrible voice, full of a violent determination, "I implore you not to cry like that. I will make up to you for all that I have done; *only* do not cry!"

Her mother's tears seem still to be beating on her heart in heavy mournful drops as she rapidly descends the staircase. As one in a dream she hurries across the hall, scarcely breathing as she moves. She has not dared to give herself one moment to meditate upon what lies before her, and always in the same motionless, breathless way enters the drawing-room and goes straight up to the hearthrug, where Lord Clanbrassil is standing waiting for her.

The lamps have not been lit, but the fire is wonderfully brilliant, lighting up even the distant corners, that might well be considered as objects for the gloom at this time of the day. She lays her hand in his without a word of greeting.

There is something probably a little strange, a little touching about her that compels him to wonder. When he has given utterance to the first usual courtesies, he stands silently beside her, watching her anxiously, and expecting (he scarcely knows why) some strange revelation to pass her lips. Her very dumbness assails him, assuring him that something has gone wrong with her, that some chord in her sweet life-music has been falsely played. An eager hope that she has come here to unburden her mind to him, and seek consolation from him, induces him to wait patiently for her to speak. But he waits in vain.

And then the silence grows intolerable, and his patience dies. Turning very suddenly to her, he leans his elbow on the chimney piece and looks down at her.

"What is it?" he asks shortly.

CHAPTER XXI.

“A hopeless darkness settles o’er my fate;
My doom is closed!”

SHE starts as though he had touched her, and looks at him in a mute appealing fashion that has something of agony in it. Has the day of grace gone by? *Must* she speak?

“Something is troubling you,” says Clanbrassil very gently. “Can I help you?”

“Yes; I am in trouble,” returns she, feverishly—“in sore trouble. And you alone can help me—if you will——”

She had meant to go on, but she breaks down a little here, drawing her breath sharply, as one might who finds himself standing upon the very brink of his life’s ruin.

“Of course I will help you,” says Clanbrassil, quietly. “Ask me what you will.”

“You are too ready with your promise. You do not yet know how far I may trespass upon your generosity,” says the girl, raising her large unhappy eyes to his, and clasping and unclasping her hands with nervous unconsciousness. “You do not know what it is I am going to ask. It is a monstrous request. I promise you, however, I shall not even remember the fact if you refuse to grant it, be sure of that, at least.”

“Let me hear what it is,” returns Clanbrassil, calmly.

His calmness is such a contrast to her ill-suppressed vehemence that for the time it subdues her. It numbs her and renders it almost impossible to her to speak. She tries to place her request in spoken words, but cannot. She feels weak, powerless.

It is, indeed, the bitterest hour in all her life. To one of her nature, so strongly impregnated with pride, the present situation contains nothing less than tortures too great to be described. Never in all her after-life does this scene come back to her without causing her a thrill of anguish.

At length she recovers herself sufficiently to look at him, and then somehow it all comes out. The fatal thing is said, and she only knows that she is still standing there before him, rigid, lowered for ever in her own esteem.

And it had taken such a little time. In a minute, as it seemed, the terrible sentence had been uttered—had gone out into the world of sound, from whence it could never be recalled. It is all over!

Suddenly she grows calm again, and determinedly compelling herself to face him, waits, with almost reckless coolness, for his reply. For a full minute, she so waits. Clanbrassil is so utterly taken aback by the nature of her request, so distinctly remote from anything he had imagined, that at first he fails to recognise the importance of making her an immediate reply. He is a rich man, beyond doubt—richer than many who count themselves moneyed people; but to lay one's hands at a moment's notice on the sum she has mentioned would be difficult to most men. For a little, then, he hesitates; not with the most distant view of refusing her, but simply because he is wondering as to where the money is to be got, with as little delay as possible.

That Imogen should misunderstand his hesitation is but natural.

"I see," she says slowly; "it was, as I said, a monstrous demand. Do not be unhappy about it, because you must refuse to grant it."

"You mistake me," exclaims Clanbrassil, in a quick, shocked tone. "You wrong me. I was but thinking how and where I could procure the sum you mention with the greatest readiness. I believe I know now. Where shall I pay it in, to—to your father's account?"

"You will help me, then!" cries she, going nearer to

him, with blanched cheeks and hands tightly clasped, and with the knowledge ripe within her breast that her last poor chance of escape has died from her. "You really mean it?" she asks in an eager, forced voice. "You are *sure—certain?* Think yet again. Consider what a large sum it is, and how small is your hope of present repayment, and do not decide too hastily."

"I am sure : I have decided."

"You have not altogether grasped it, perhaps, she goes on desperately. "There are so many reasons why you should refuse me. You—you may *never* be repaid."

"So be it," says Clanbrassil doggedly.

"Ah, but think—think again," entreats she fervently. "Perhaps—perhaps you fear that I shall be cast down, offended, made miserable by your refusal ; but" (here she laughs out loud with a very pitiable burst of merriment that sends the tears streaming down her cheeks) "but indeed I should not?"

"I fear only that you are in great trouble. I think only how I can serve you," returns he simply.

The entire kindness and nobility of his nature touches her to the heart. Yet the pain that is growing rapidly within her to a perfect growth, renders it almost impossible to her to speak or acknowledge in any way her debt.

"What shall I say to you?" she breathes at last, in a low, muffled tone. "How shall I thank you?"

"Ah! not that. Say nothing. Do not!" entreats Clanbrassil, in a pained, hurried manner, moving away from her.

A silence hard to break falls between them. It exists almost to awkwardness, yet neither seems to heed it. Meanwhile, time speeds on unrelentingly, careless of the weal or woe it carries with it. One, two, three! one, two three! goes the small ormolu clock upon the chimney-piece, as it ticks away its little monotonous existence. The sounds seem to beat themselves into Imogen's brain. It appears to her as though thought is impossible to her at this last moment. She dreams of nothing, remembers nothing, endures nothing save a melancholy certainty that for her, presently, life's sweetness and liberty and tender sympathy will for ever be impossibilities. Yes; it is a

terrible debt that she owes him, and for it she must pay a yet more terrible price!

At length, moving herself by a supreme effort, she puts out her hand and lays it gently on Clanbrassil's. It is so cold that it unnerves him. Her heart is beating wildly, and her face is the colour of death.

"Do you remember a question you asked me two weeks ago?" she asks in a strained, unnatural way. "Do you still *care* to remember it? Because, if so" (she pauses, as if unable to go on, and then recovers herself), "I have now a different answer to give you."

"Two weeks ago I asked you to marry me," replies Clanbrassil, a dark red flush mounting to his brow.

He looks at her strangely.

"And then I said 'No.' Now—*now*," murmurs she faintly, "I would say, 'Yes.'"

She covers her face with her hands. A thick, dry, tearless sob escapes her.

"But I have not asked you to say it, says Lord Clanbrassil coldly. "What! do you imagine that because I have been enabled to give you some help in this matter of your father's, I necessarily consider I have a claim upon you? What have I done that you should so insult me? Believe me, Miss Heriot, in so thinking you are doing both yourself and me a great injustice."

"You are too good for me; I feel, I know that," persists Imogen steadily. "And yet, I know you love me. If you still care to marry me, I tell you I will gladly be your wife."

"*Gladly!* Do you know what you are saying?" asks he, with resolute coldness still, but with difficulty. All his pulses are throbbing wildly. It is with a firm hand he keeps down the rising hope that is consuming him, "Remember what your thoughtless words must mean to me—life, hope, happiness greater than I have of late dared to dream of; and beware lest I take advantage of them!"

"What I have said, I mean," insists she, firmly.

"*'Gladly'*—that was the word you used. Did you mean that?" demands he, in deep agitation. "I cannot

believe it. Why should the fact that I have been fortunate enough to be able to do you a service compel you to offer me so great a return? I refuse to accept it. There is still some happiness left to me in the thought that I have served you. I know that all you have said has been uttered through a mistaken sense of gratitude; and I—I decline to listen to it.”

“But——”

“No! Have you no mercy?” cries he, roughly. “Can’t you understand how strong is my temptation? I implore you to save yourself and me, and desist from further words—and——” (his voice sinks, and he turns aside)—“and leave me desolate, as I was before.”

“Ah! hear me!” entreats she, determined to advocate honestly her own doom, and holding out to him her hands. “If I tell you that I do not love you with that passionate love with which some women can bless the men they marry, but that above all living men I respect you, will *that* suffice? Will it content you? Will you then take me as I am?”

“No,” returns he indistinctly.

He has taken her hands, however, and the tightness of his grasp amounts almost to pain.

“No; I love you too well to permit you so to sacrifice yourself. My affection is not so poor a thing as that. I will wait until your heart and lips can join to tell me the one thing I care to hear.”

“It may be too late then,” urges she passionately. And then all at once the knowledge of how earnestly she is pleading against herself smites upon her, and her trembling lips part, and a strange, sad little laugh breaks from her. “See what a poor frail thing I am!” she says, pushing up her sleeves to show her arm beneath, that indeed has grown very slight and fragile during these past months; “scarcely worth your acceptance.” Then all suddenly she bursts into a wild storm of tears, “I *ask* you to take me now,” she cries. “How will it be, if later on I am not here to take?”

“Imogen? Imogen!” cries the young man in a frenzied tone. Standing there, in the flickering fire-light, with the

shadows all about her, she looks so pale, so broken—with her beautiful head bowed, and her quivering fingers hiding the eyes through which the cruel tears are running—that a terrible fear lays siege to his soul. "It shall be as you will," he says, "if only you can assure me you will be happy."

"I shall be happy," she declares feverishly, as though resolute to beat down her own misgivings; but, even as she says it, her tears break forth afresh.

A few minutes later she lifts her head, and looks at him.

"Have I disenchanted you? A nervous woman is a thing to be avoided, is it not?" she asks, with a brave attempt to appear like her former self. She forces to her lips a wan sad smile, though still the heavy drops hang on her lashes. "You should have come to my rescue sooner," she says, still smiling that little wintry gleam of gaiety. "It is not every day the proposal is made by the woman!"

"I hope—I think you will never regret it," returns Clanbrassil, regarding her gravely. "If I were *quite* certain this was for your good, and that you would never in the future wish unsaid the words you have now uttered, I should at least be satisfied."

"Be satisfied, then," returns she gently. But the dull aching pain within her grows even less bearable as she gives this expected assurance.

A slight pause ensues, and then—

"There is no one else," asks he, looking directly at her.

"There is no one else," returns she steadily but very slowly; and when this last sentence passes her lips a long, long sigh escapes her.

Clanbrassil, as though for the first time moved to hope, lifts her hand and presses it to his lips. There is something a little vehement, a little proprietary in the caress, though hardly anything that could be called demonstrative. Yet, as his lips meet her hand, Miss Heriot is conscious of a sudden sharp shiver that shakes her from head to foot. Only a few short minutes ago, when first she became alive to the extreme generosity and gentleness of his disposition, she had been as near loving him as she ever could be; but now, as he stands there, in possession as it were, when he

has made her understand by his simple action how completely she has of her own doing surrendered herself into his hands, a great revulsion takes place within her. All at once she grows *alive*, and is conscious of a keen sense of disloyalty, and a wild, hungry craving to be free. Something in her face appeals to him."

"Shall I leave you now?" he asks, bending solicitously over her. "You look tired. You have worn yourself out thinking for, and worrying about, the welfare of others."

Imogen sighs heavily.

"Tired; yes," she says, moving her head wearily from side to side.

"I may come again to-morrow?"

"To-morrow," with a faint start. "Oh, yes; of course, to-morrow!"

"At twelve?" suggests he eagerly.

"At four!" slowly. Then with a strange impatience, "Not until then: I *cannot* see you until then."

"At four, then," agrees Clanbrassil calmly.

He is feeling wounded and foolishly disappointed. Are all women so cold, so immovable as this one, on whom his very soul seems set? She had warned him that as yet no love for him reigned within her heart: yet *something* he had expected. There might not indeed be the sweet outspoken anxiety to see him soon again, the tender, tearful regretfulness at parting which he has so frequently thought of in his solitudes, and pictured dimly to himself as likely some day to dawn for him; but the odour of all this, the baby-breath of it, he had madly looked for now, and found it wanting. Has she then possibly, not even so much as a kindly regard for him!

He would have liked to leave her now without another word, but that is impossible.

"To-morrow, then, is it your wish that I should speak to Sir Hugh? Or shall I allow you still further time for reflection on this matter?" he asks courteously.

"Time is not wanted for that: you may speak to papa when you choose. And"—she looks up at him earnestly, as though she has divined his thoughts of the past few

minutes—"you must try to trust me a little more than you do, and bear with me at times."

"I trust you entirely!" he says fervently; "be sure of that." All his coldness has vanished with her first kind word. His hand closes upon hers. "Only try—try to love me. And now good-night."

"Good-night."

He draws her gently towards him, and looks into her face; not into her eyes—they are veiled from him.

"May I?" he asks tremulously.

No refusal comes through her parted lips, and so he kisses her. It is a warm, a loving embrace, but it gains no return, and no soft, fond blush rises to dye her cheeks and mark the tender act. No happy tremor seizes her; no gentle girlish agitation fills her breast. Like a marble statue she stands to receive and endure the caress, going through her part mechanically, and accepting it as a portion of the wretched task she has undertaken to perform, feeling numbed and chilled and lifeless the while.

* * * * *

When he is gone, she moves slowly away from the fire, and goes upstairs again to the room where she had last seen her father and mother. They are still there: Sir Hugh standing at the window, gazing out hopelessly at the mournful darkness; Lady Olivia sitting before the fireplace, as though in the act of warming herself. But the fire has gone out long ago without her knowing it, so deeply is she immersed in saddest thought, and nothing now remains but the grey, half-warm cinders.

Everything looks cold, cheerless, comfortless. The traces of tears are still lying upon her mother's cheeks, and even as Imogen watches her a heavy drop falls with a sullen sound into her lap.

"Mamma, be comforted!" cries Imogen, starting suddenly forward from where she has been standing unnoticed in the shadow of the doorway. "I have done what you wished me to do: I have kept my promise. In a few days the money you want will be yours."

Lady Olivia rises from her chair with a sharp exclamation, and Sir Hugh comes out from the window.

"Imogen! what is it you mean?" asks her mother, faintly.

"The money—I have *bought* it!" says the girl slowly. "I—I have promised to marry Lord Clanbrassil!"

Lady Olivia comes towards her, flushed and triumphant. Here, indeed, is a match worthy of her darling. All recollection of the relief to be gained through the promised money fades in comparison with this most wonderful news. At last Imogen has made her choice, and it is a very desirable one.

"My dear, dear girl, is it true?" she asks, with open and glad excitement. "How delighted I am! How——" She would have embraced Imogen; but the girl recoils from her, and puts up her hands to her ears as though to shut out the cruel sounds of congratulation.

"Not now!—not now!" she exclaims almost roughly.

How is it possible for her to endure their felicitations and good wishes about what seems to her the bitterest event in all her life? How can she submit to questionings and kindly probings when she feels her heart is breaking? It is all so bare, so void, such a mockery of joy!

Hurrying to her own room, she flings herself face downwards on her bed, and strives with all her might to quiet the thoughts that rage within her, and threaten to master her.

To Lady Olivia, left standing in the centre of her own room, there comes a terrible misgiving. Her heart smites her as she remembers the look in Imogen's eyes when she went forward to greet her. The girl's repulse has not impressed or angered her: it is already forgotten; and only the memory of her child's sad eyes, and the great unhappy light that shone in them, revealing to the mother's heart so much that would have been withheld with passionate determination, makes itself felt.

The uncontrollable desire to see her again, to learn how it really is with her, sends Lady Olivia through the corridors until she reaches Imogen's door. She knocks lightly, and then enters.

It is plain her coming has been heard, because Imogen has sprung from the bed, and now remains mute by the side of it, with pretty dishevelled hair and anguished eyes that are full of a subtle defiance. She has clasped her hands together, and it seems to the mother, trembling on the threshold, that the beautiful face has grown suddenly aged and lined by passionate care. Lady Olivia stretches out her arms to her.

“Imogen, come to me!” she cries aloud; “come! Am I not your mother?”

There is a minute’s pause, and then the girl’s sad face changes. The defiance dies from it; and all at once she runs to Lady Olivia, and twines her arms round her, and hides her mournful eyes upon her breast, and “Oh, mother! mother! mother!” moans she, through her sad sobbing.

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And with the morning light comes the knowledge that after all the sacrifice was needless! It brings a letter from Lady Edgerton’s solicitor, containing the news of the old lady’s sudden demise at her mansion in Grosvenor Square, and states further that by her will she had bequeathed to her “well-beloved grand-niece, Imogen Heriot,” all that of which she died possessed, amounting *in toto* to about one hundred thousand pounds!

CHAPTER XXII.

"Where, when the gods would be cruel,
Do they go for a torture? Where
Plant thorns, set pain as a jewel?
Ah! not in the flesh, not there!

"The racks of earth and the rods
Are weak as foam on the sands;
In the heart is the prey for gods,
Who crucify hearts, not hands."

THE train steams slowly into Egworth station, and Edith Brown, springing on to the platform, looks lazily around him. The place somehow seems changed—brighter, in a manner more friendly. It was on a bleak and cold winter's day he had left it. Now the air is clear and bright; there is even a suspicion of warmth in the air. Snows are forgotten, and all things have broken into life, and seem to rejoice with open gladness in the certainty that "Spring comes slowly up this way."

Then, in that past, most wretched time, all had been winter with him, and he had sworn to himself on leaving The Chevies that no earthly power should induce him ever to set foot again upon the threshold of the house where *she* might be. He had suffered cruelly; but now he was done with her. So he thought then! She had bidden him "forget:" it was her last word, and he would religiously obey it. And for almost a week he believed that this thing might be possible to him. She was, she should be, naught to him any more for ever.

"She was sweet to me once, who am fled and escaped from the rage of her reign."

Such a quotation, and others of its kind, he had muttered to himself, and had tried honestly to believe in them as

applied to himself ; but at the end of that strange, unreal week he woke again to the living pain that was destroying him, and knew that he had lied to himself, and that he had believed in vain !

Yet still he clung to his determination to see her no more ; and all through the dreary winter ate his heart away, going with dull brains about his daily duties, and hating with all his soul each paltry interruption that took his thoughts from her.

But with the first faint dawn of spring the cloud lifted from his heart, and a mad craving to see her again, to gaze once more into her cold but lovely eyes, became with him a passion. At the very last he accepted, even then against his better judgment, one of the many invitations to revisit them that had been sent to him from time to time from the Heriots.

His oath melted before him like the late hoar frost beneath the touch of genial spring, and in spite of all stern resolves *this*

“ Young man’s fancy lightly turned to thoughts of love.”

To see her again—only to see her. That is the burden of his heart’s cry ; and it refuses to cease its lamentations until he at last finds himself upon the platform at Egworth, within a mile or so of its desire.

A dog-cart and groom are in attendance ; but Felix, having decided on taking the footpath through the park that will bring him, if possible, quicker to the house, leaves the man to look after his luggage, and goes briskly down the village street.

Here the lounging shopkeepers gaping at their open doors, and the ruddy children shouting at their play, all look up to give him rustic words of welcome and merry smiles of recognition. Smiling back at them in return, Felix feels his blue eyes kindle, and knows how sweet a thing it is to be remembered.

Altogether he is in a delightful mood, as he goes ever onward, holding up his head the while to catch the crisp fresh breeze. Does not each step bring him nearer to her who is his chief thought—nearer to the time when he shall

see her, hear her voice, touch her hand again? Just now the world seems to him a beautiful conception, free from stain of care or sorrow, and full of lovely possibilities that may yet be his.

It is indeed a charming evening, fragrant, redolent of the earth's resurrection, and of that sweet coming maiden month—

“Who unlocks the flowers to paint the laughing soil.”

With eager footsteps he crosses the park, beneath the spreading branches of the trees, that already are putting forth their tender shafts of green; the sunlight is slowly but surely dying, and the pink clouds are now dulling into a tender grey. Upon a tree quite close to him a little woodland songster is pouring forth its heart in richest melody,

“Shedding its song upon height, upon hollow,
From tawny body and sweet small mouth.”

Was there ever so fair a world? His heart throbs with a recognition of the good that it may hold for him!

He has built his castle, and is living in it blissfully, unthinking of what the morrow may bring. Alas! that so soon the foundations of it must be proved but air!

Coming presently to the little ivy-covered church that belongs to the estate, and that every Sunday is thronged with the more immediate farmers and tenants, besides the family from The Chevies, Felix pauses, and finally, seeing the side door open, advances towards it, half through idle curiosity, half through a desire to look again upon the pew where last he had seen her sit. He enters the doorway, and goes as far as the entrance to the aisle; but there he stops.

His eyes have fallen upon the sole occupant of the building—upon Imogen! as with clasped hands and lowered head she kneels before the altar-rails!

She is so motionless that one might readily have imagined her in the gathering dusk to be carved in stone. Her very breath seems stilled: nothing betrays the life within her. From the stained glass above her bowed head a glorious stream of crimson and purple and gold glory,

born of the dying sun, breaks upon her, illuminating all her yellow hair and the rich hues of her violet velvet gown.

Her attitude might betoken anything—remorse, or devotion, or despair. Who shall decide? She is on her knees, lost to the world; with her grief—whatever it may be—before her, and only heaven as her witness! All earthly presence is unknown to her. And Felix, standing spell-bound watching her, is conscious in some vague way of all this, and also of an uneasy sense of creeping dishonour that warns him to retire as swiftly, as lightly, as he came. Even as he obeys this inward mandate and turns to the door, something within attracts him. Instinctively his eyes once more seek the kneeling figure. The head is more bowed now, as if in keener anguish; and a faint, sad, subdued sound comes to him across the musty air. Is it a sob?—a sigh?

He finds his way into the churchyard, and once more follows the path that leads to the house; but the glory of the early spring has departed from the evening, and only the memory of that faint, sad sound remains, chilling to death all the gladness that had been in him. Was it a sob? What trouble has fallen upon her?

At the park gates he meets little Peyton Travers, the heir of Moorlands, Lady Olivia's only grandson, engaged in a desperate affray with the sturdy son of the lodge-keeper. Felix had seen a good deal of the boy, off and on, at the house of a mutual friend since he left the Chevies; and the little lad had had contracted for him a certain affection. Now, seeing him, Peyton forgets in his delighted surprise the score he has been so anxious to settle with the young peasant, and running to Felix throws his arms round his neck with all a child's glad fervour and enthusiasm.

"Oh! Felix, is it really you?" he cries rapturously; whilst the peasant looks on in high disgust at having his chance of "licking a swell" so unceremoniously put an end to. "I am glad to see you. How long are you going to stay? Why didn't you come at Christmas? Did you bring me the knife you promised?"

Felix had forgotten all about the knife, but he knows better than to say so. He instantly puts his hand in his

pocket, and produces a very handsome specimen of the article in question, and gives it to the expectant boy.

"Oh! I say, what a beauty!" cries the child eagerly. "Three blades, and what is this?—a corkscrew! Oh! father's has a corkscrew. How did you guess the very one I was longing for, Felix?" Then, suddenly checking himself with a hospitable remembrance—"But come home and see them all."

"Come, then," says Felix.

"We've been all awfully dull here lately," prattles on the boy, who, like all boys, seems to find a difficulty in holding his tongue; "every one of us—even Aunt Patricia. You know she is going to marry Mr. Bohun; and he is away in Ireland. Mamma says she is lonely: but what on earth is she lonely for? There are lots of other people to talk to!"

"It is very unreasonable of her, certainly," acquiesces Felix with a little laugh.

"When I heard you were coming here again, I asked mamma to let me come too, and stay with grandma for a while, and she let me, because Florence is cutting her teeth, and Constance was looking very red all over—little spots you know—and mamma was right glad, I can tell you"—with charming candour—"to get one of us out of the way. We are so many, and so very troublesome!" says Peyton, innocently but ludicrously, the stilted phrase, so evidently borrowed from his elders, coming with a quaint sedateness from his youthful lips.

"I must consider it a very fortunate thing for me," says Felix gravely, "that poor Florence is just now cutting her teeth. It has given me the chance of seeing you again."

"Just so," acquiesces Peyton, cheerfully. "That's just what I thought when they said I might come here to meet you. How funny we should both think the same, isn't it? Mamma would hardly let me come to meet anyone else; because she says Uncle Sandie is a bad child's guide, and would get me into mischief. But she is very fond of you."

"Don't tell that to your papa," says Felix.

"No! Why? Papa likes you too. Oh! did I tell you,

though, about the pony he gave me at Christmas? *Such* a darling—goes like the wind, and jumps! Jumps, mind you”—in a mysterious whisper—“as well as a big horse. But don’t tell that to gran’mā, because she would tell mamma, and then they would take my pony away from me. It’s a horrible nuisance being the *only* boy, you know,” winds up Master Peyton, plaintively; “they make such a fuss about one, and coddle and bother one so!”

“Poor fellow!” exclaims Felix, sympathetically.

“I dare say there will be some fun now you are come,” goes on the boy, hopefully; “and I’m sure I hope so. You never saw anything like Aunt Imogen lately. She mopes about, and looks so unhappy, just as if she always had tears in her eyes. And they are such big eyes too! She is a great deal sadder even than Aunt Patricia!”

Here he pauses as though pondering something in his mind, and then looks inquisitively up at Felix.

“Do all people who are going to be married look unhappy?” asks he.

“No,” returns Felix. At first, the real meaning of the boy’s words had not reached him. Now he turns sharply towards him.

“There is no one going to be married, except your Aunt Patricia,” he says in a tone he means to be assertive, but which a terrible fear renders only interrogative.

“Why, Aunt Imogen is,” declares Peyton. “Didn’t you know it? I heard grannie telling mamma she had at last made up her mind.”

“About *what*?” fiercely.

“Lord Clanbrassil, you know,” says the boy in a wondering tone.

“What of him?”

“Why, she is engaged to him! Did no one tell you? Everybody knows it now. They are to be married this spring, and auntie looks just as if she was going to be buried instead of married.”

“Peyton,” says Felix in a low, curious tone, “run on before me, and tell Lady Olivia I am coming. Go! go!”

“I’ll tell her,” cries the child gaily, darting away from him with all the swiftness of a swallow.

When he is quite out of sight, Felix turns aside into a rustic path that leads, not to the house, but from it, and walks on rapidly in the direction of the wood once more, scarce knowing whither his steps are leading him.

He is too stunned for any minute reasoning or reflection, and is capable only of the certainty that a blow, the most crushing, the most complete, has been dealt him. An hour ago, he was, comparatively speaking, happy ; *now*——

Where is the vernal sweetness that had taken his senses captive, then ? Where the freshness of the evening breeze—the tender beauty in the budding life around ? All gone, vanished, dead as the wild hopes he has for so many months—unconsciously, yet so passionately—cherished ?

The soddened leaves, belonging to last year, seem like those hopes as he treads them under foot. A quick longing that he might so deal with his soul's agony—to trample it, to crush it to death and to leave it far behind him—takes possession of him. He is walking swiftly, with down-bent head and frowning brow, when he finds himself at the end of the path he has chosen. Lifting his eyes suddenly, he finds himself face to face with Miss Heriot !

CHAPTER XXIII.

"Weep I cannot,
But my heart bleeds."

"I pray thee, cease thy counsel,
Which falls into mine ears as profitless
As water in a sieve."

SHE is thinner than when last he saw her—or, at least, so he fancies—and the traces of tears lie wet upon her face, not enough to disfigure its beauty, but to render it pale, sad, pitiable. With all the cruel knowledge of the last half-hour still fresh within his mind, it is his misfortune to know, at this instant of their meeting, that he now loves her as he never loved her before. Imogen, cold, indifferent, reserved, had chained his heart against his will. To Imogen, standing here white and mournful before him, he *gives* it, with a vehement rush of tenderness that almost overwhelms him with its intensity.

She had started a little on seeing him, but not very perceptibly, and now a faint flickering of her long lashes alone betrays the fact that some emotion is known to her.

"I did not imagine I should meet you here," she says, giving him her hand with a careful little smile, and speaking in a tone studiously composed. "You have been to the house? You have seen my mother?"

"No," returns Felix shortly. He has dropped her hand, but finds it quite impossible to remove his eyes from hers.

"No! How is it you are coming this way, then?—" She breaks off her question somewhat abruptly, and looks at the dead leaves beneath her. "Your people are quite well, I hope?" she asks hurriedly.

Felix says:

"Quite well, thank you," as in duty bound, though quite unconsciously. He is lost in a heavy dream, and is uncertain of all things save that Imogen is by his side, but lost—lost!

Silently they pace on together until they come to within a few yards of the chief avenue where Felix had parted from young Travers a while ago. A great bank of laurels, rhododendrons, and myrtles rises before them, shielding them from the gravelled path beyond. Felix, stopping here abruptly, looks at her with a strange intensity.

"Is it true?" he asks simply, but with a subdued fire in his eyes that warms her.

"Yes; it is quite true," she replies as simply, disdaining to put off the evil hour by equivocation or pretended ignorance.

"That you are going to marry—*him*?"

"That I am going to marry Lord Clanbrassil," coldly.

"How long have you been engaged to him?"

"For two months."

"For two long months!" He breaks into a bitter laugh. "Yet I never heard of it. No one remembered to tell *me* the good news! Were my congratulations of no worth?" Then fiercely, "Why was it left to be broken to me by a boy—a mere child?"

"Was it Peyton?" asks she in a low tone. She is trembling very much, and her lips are quite white.

"Yes; Peyton. After all, what does it matter who told me, or when I heard it?" he says wearily, stretching out his arms as one might who is tired to death. There is a slight pause, and then—"Are you happy?" he asks very abruptly, looking keenly at her.

A hot colour flames into her wan cheeks.

"You ask me a strange question," she says with gentle affront in her voice. "Do I then look unhappy?"

"I think so," replies he gravely. "Your face seems changed to me; it does not wear its old expression, and your mouth—Just now, as I was passing by the chapel, I glanced in, and"—she raises her eyes to his with a sudden gleam in them—"and I saw you. You were kneeling at the altar rails, and as I stood there (forgive

me ! it was but for a moment) I thought I heard——” He ceases speaking, as though overcome by a great anguish. “Imogen !” he exclaims painfully, “were you crying ?”

She stays him by an imperious wave of her hand. She tries to answer him, but for a moment cannot. Then—

“It was dishonourable !” she murmurs in a low, choked tone.

“It was an accident,” returns he coldly. “But I am accustomed to injustice from you. All this is beside the question, however, The one thing that still haunts me is the fear that you were suffering—that you——”

“Let no such fear trouble you,” interrupts she calmly. “I confess that, when you saw me an hour ago, I was distressed about some silly matter that, if you knew what it was, would probably create in you a feeling of contemptuous mirth. But because a few absurd tears escape one, is it then necessarily to be concluded that one has sunk into the very lowest depths of despair ? Your imagination has run riot here,” she goes on, with a frugal smile. “Believe me, I have nothing to do with suffering.”

To this he says nothing ; but there is a lingering penetration in the glance he has fixed upon her that angers her beyond endurance.

“You do not believe me,” she says haughtily ; “yet you can assign no cause for your disbelief. It is absurd ! I will listen to no more of this. Lord Clanbrassil, I feel sure, would not wish me to do so, and——”

“And he is everything to you now, whilst all the rest of the world count as nothing,” finishes Felix, with a bitter laugh. “Is that what you would say ? And do you expect me to believe it ? If so, I tell you plainly that I do not, and never shall. Look you !” exclaims he passionately, “do you imagine I have forgotten how things were with you and him when last I was here ?—the polite boredom in your face when he spoke to you, the courteous manner in which you vainly strove to conceal the irritation his attentions caused you. Yet, seeing all this as I did, I still doubted you. I *felt* what the end would be. The world drew you to it. For its sake you have sacrificed all that most women hold precious—your life, your hope,

your freedom. In all the barren days that lie before you, you will find nothing but repentance and a sure regret. From my soul," exclaims the young man fervently, "I *pity* you!"

"I thank you, sir," she replies, in a low tone; and then looking at him with a smile as strange as it is mournful—"You understand me—well."

"I have been unkind to you—nay brutal!" cries he, stung to sudden remorse by the sadness of her glance, and by a certain reproach in it that is inexplicable to him. "But how can I be silent when I see you blindly going towards this thing? He is unsuited to you in every way; there is not one idea in common between you. Oh, think—pause before it is too late! Why will you so miserably destroy your whole long sweet life? Was there some great reason for it of which I know nothing? Could you not have waited? My life! My beloved! is there nothing I can do for you? Why was power denied me to draw your heart to mine?"

His whole soul is in his voice; his beautiful eyes, dark and haggard with his pain, look beseechingly into hers.

She turns resolutely aside. Her face is, if possible, whiter than his; but her tone when she speaks is steady, and her mouth firm. Whatever this loveless marriage may cost her, she is at least sufficiently loyal to the man she has promised to marry to conceal it from all save her own heart.

"It seems a pity," she says slowly, with her eyes upon the ground. "that you should so determinedly think of me as a martyr to my own worldly aspirations. Let us at once agree to the worldliness, if you will; but believe me, the later suffering, the after-repentance which you predict, I shall never know. I am happy—do you hear me?" with a sudden access of angry impatience—"perfectly happy! My present position, as the affianced wife of Clanbrassil, is altogether one of my own choosing; I would not have it altered or undone in any way. I have quite made up my mind; and though"—with a little flash from her violet eyes—"you once told me you considered me unworthy to be the wife of any honest man, I am still vain

enough to believe that, at all events, I can make this most honest man fairly contented.

She pauses, rather from a lack of breath and some undue excitement that she fails to quell than because of a desire for silence.

"I was mad when I said that," returns he slowly. "I have always remembered that I said it, but hoped always that by you the cruel speech was forgotten. Believe me, I have endured much because of it. Will you forgive it now—now, when I am learning for the first time how bare a world it is?"

"It was a foolish speech: I regret that I recalled it," says Imogen indifferently. "That I bear you no ill-will because of it you may be sure."

She stirs the dried leaves idly with her foot, and a little reflective frown gathers on her forehead. Felix, who seems to find a difficulty in removing his eyes from her face, draws nearer to her.

"You say you have chosen Clanbrassil of your own free choice?" he says abruptly. "Am I to understand from that that you love him?"

Miss Heriot throws up her head. There is an undeniably angry gleam now in the great sapphire eyes she lifts to his.

"By what right do you ask me that?" she says quickly.

There is a slight pause, and then:

"It is true; I have no right," returns he sadly. "Yet will you answer me?"

"No!" Her face has settled into its old expression of haughty impenetrability. "To no living person will I answer that. And you, of all people, should be the last to approach the subject—you, who would have married me *without* this love of which you seem to think so highly."

There is unmeasured scorn in her voice.

"Better gain you so than lose you altogether," says Felix dreamily; "and yet——"

"A mean-spirited speech," coldly.

"But nevertheless true," replies he doggedly.

He has at last ceased from his eager examination of her face, and now seems sunk in a painful reverie. It is almost as though he has forgotten for the moment her nearness,

her very existence. For all these past delusive months, unknown to himself, he has lived on the thought of seeing her some day again; had pictured her to himself day by day, and hour by hour, in every graceful attitude, his too faithful memory had kept warm within his heart. And now at last all is at an end. Never more must he dream of her but as one might of the beloved dead, who have passed away for ever and are lost to all save saddest recollection. Clanbrassil, as it seems to him, has gained without a struggle for that which he (Felix) would gladly have bartered away all his earthly possessions.

"It grows late," says Imogen presently, in a warning tone.

She moves a little away from him on the homeward path, but even this action of hers fails to rouse him from his stupor. He knows that she has left him, and knows, too, with a fresh pang that for the future he must have no place beside her. He is holding his walking-stick between both his hands with a somewhat nervous grip, and his gaze is directed to the earth. His face has grown almost immovable in its gravity.

He has believed her quite gone, when a sound warns him of her return.

"There is one other thing," she says, speaking with an eager hesitation. "It is better that I should mention it. You promised my mother, I think, to stay with us for a month, and—and I—I fear——Don't you see," she cries with a desperate rush, "how strange it will look if you leave us now *immediately* on your arrival? It will occasion talk. An explanation will be expected, and——if ——" in a low tone, "you could try to stay for a little while——"

"To witness your felicity," interrupts he, not hastily or bitterly, but rather in a voice totally devoid of emotion. He does not look at her, or change his position in any way. "Is my cup, then, not full enough for you? Not that it matters really," he goes on wearily. "I will stay, of course. I will do anything you wish."

"Oh, no! not if it should be to the increasing of your unhappiness," she exclaims in a little broken way. There

are tears in her voice and eyes, but now they fail to move him.

"Nothing could increase it," he says, in the same monotonous way, and without lifting his eyes. "Comfort yourself with that thought. Here or anywhere else, it is all the same to me. I have had my final wrench. Fate has done its worst: from this hour I defy it."

By some unconscious strain of his hands the stick between them breaks in two. He drops the pieces gently, and draws his breath with some heaviness.

Imogen comes even closer to him, and holds out her hand. The tears are now running down her cheeks.

"Why— *why* may we not be friends?" she whispers pathetically.

It is but a whisper, yet it reaches him with startling force, and pierces to his very heart. He turns and looks at her—a long steady glance, so full of a wild and passionate reproach that she pales beneath it.

With a gesture, gentle but determined, he pushes away from him her proffered hand, and, turning his back upon her, disappears quickly down the woodland path.

CHAPTER XXIV.

"But with the incessant hours
Fresh grief and greener woe
Spring, as the sudden sun
Year after year makes flowers;
And these die down and grow,
And the next year lacks none."

It is a week later—a week of such frost and snow as could not be outdone by January at its worst. All the pale pensive buds of early February, that had been putting forth their strength in a fond belief in the treacherous sunshine, have been sadly done to death by the sharp winds and sleet that, lying long time in ambush, have now come out to kill them, like traitors as they are.

The ponds are all frozen again. The lake, that has never yet entirely thawed, is now crying aloud to the people at The Chevies to come and take one last skate upon it, before spring fights its final battle with old winter.

The night is a bitter one, and still it is freezing hard—so hard as to indicate a thicker ice on the morrow.

"We ought to make up a party and go to the lake to-morrow afternoon," suggests Sandie brilliantly, during a pause that occurs between the *entrées*.

Sir Hugh, at the foot of the table, is looking ten years younger than when last we saw him. He is laughing at some remark of Patricia's, and his whole air and bearing is as free from care as though that bugbear had never come near him. The knowledge that he is at last free from debt, that he can raise his head amongst his fellows without fear of descending shame, has made a new man of him. It is as though he can breathe again.

The best part of Lady Edgerton's legacy had been

generously devoted by Imogen to the clearing of the estate. There was even in the midst of her trouble a great joy to her in thus being the means of lifting her father's name above all taint of dishonour. There was, too, a more subdued, but perhaps even keener, pleasure in the sense of relief she experienced on feeling she need not be a debtor to Lord Clanbrassil. That momentary hesitation of his had rankled in her breast, and it was with a most natural throb of pride she told him on their next meeting that she would no longer require from him that heavy sum he had so willingly promised her.

She had said nothing, of course, of the engagement between them into which a sense of justice had forced her. She had waited with a terrible anxiety for him to speak—to give her some loophole through which she might escape. But he had said nothing. He made no offer to release her, and at the close of the interview she grew sick at heart, knowing herself to be finally bound by the chains she had with her own hands woven.

Clanbrassil, who happens to be dining with them to-night, and who, as a rule, agrees with every one, seconds the suggestion made by Sandie as to the skating expedition, and appeals to Miss Heriot, who sits beside him, for further support. She, in the listless indifferent fashion that of late has become habitual to her, thinks she has lost her skates or mislaid them, or *something*; but Sylvia Yelverton, who is also present, and who has the most beautiful feet in the county, overrules all such juvenile waverings, by declaring that she has several pairs of skates to lend, and that a day on the ice will be delicious.

"But perhaps it would be hardly safe to-morrow," she says reflectively. "The day after, eh?" The ice might be firmer then, don't you think?"

"Much firmer," acquiesces Sandie innocently; "sure to be! Tom is coming the day after."

Everybody very properly declines to hear him; but Miss Yelverton, for all that, blushes a fine crimson.

It is "much firmer;" upon this they are all agreed when the appointed day arrives, bringing with it Tom by a very early train. There is no doubt amongst those assembled at

The Chevies as to the desirability of the day for skating purposes; and after the usual amount of harmless squabbling as to who will drive to the lake with whom, the party falls into place.

Patricia, seeing Felix looking pale and silent, with the sweetness that always characterises her, entreats him in the prettiest manner to drive her in her own little pony-carriage. Imogen, of course, has been tacitly allotted to Lord Clanbrassil. Tom and Sylvia Yelverton have made a virtue of necessity, and have gone with Lady Olivia in one of the open carriages given to the dowagers; whilst Sandie, who at this period of his existence is hopelessly and finally in love (for about the fourteenth time) with an extremely pretty and astonishingly silly little girl staying with the Deverills, has vanished with her in some mysterious way at an early stage of the proceedings, and does not turn up again until they are all fairly on the ice. Here, in a distant corner, he is plainly to be seen kneeling before his divinity.

"Look at Sandie trying how *not* to put on that little girl's skates," says Tom, laughing.

And indeed Sandie, to say the truth, is an unconscionably long time about it. One would think he never saw a skate before, so clumsily he lingers over his task. He seems wrapt in a contemplation of Miss De Lisle's charms, who, though deplorably idiotic, can always manage to look charming, which perhaps, after all, is the principal thing.

The cold but brilliant sun breaks through the lowering clouds; the ice sparkles; from the copse yonder the fresh sweet smell of the budding pines is borne on the rapid air that encircles the flying forms of the girls clad in their soft luxurious furs, their gleaming broches and satins, and delicate clinging laces.

It is a magnificent day, hard and dry, and bitterly cold as frost can make it. Too cold, perhaps, for the dowagers, who, in spite of their warm mufflings, are openly chattering, but who still sit shivering heroically, whilst the younger members race each other across the glassy surface of the lake, and cut all sorts of strange figures, and are warm as toast, every one

"Ah, Felix! come to me!" cries Patricia, in an agonised tone.

She has got into some small hobble with her skates, and looks prettily distressed. Felix having skated to her assistance, she gives him her hand as a reward, and both go flying with graceful motions over the frozen water. It strikes Felix with a sort of grim amusement that this very lovable girl, bereft of her own sweetheart, feels for him a pity that is akin to a sisterly love at least, and has taken him under her tender protection.

Imogen, who, as in duty bound, is skating with Lord Clanbrassil, at this moment passes them. Patricia's dark face is lit up with pleasurable excitement, and Felix is laughing at one of her lively sallies, and looking with a certain sense of admiration into her glowing eyes. It is all over in a little flash; but Imogen is conscious of a faint chill, and, slackening her pace, looks at her affianced husband. But he, looking the other way to where Penelope Darnley is hopelessly floundering along beneath Sandie's disgusted care, does not see the glance of appeal.

"Lord Clanbrassil," says Imogen very distinctly.

She is not in the humour just now to brook the very smallest dereliction of duty.

"Eh?" exclaims he, startled. "Tired—eh?" anxiously.

"Yes. I should like to rest for a little upon one of those rugs on the bank."

"Well, we'll go there," says he.

"It will rest me more to be quite alone," declares Imogen slowly but decisively. "I should like to watch you and the others skating for a little while."

"Whatever you prefer," agrees he good-humouredly. Then suddenly, and a little nervously, "There is something I am always wanting to say to you. I may as well do it now. My name, you know: you always address me so formally. Why can't you call me George?"

"Is that your name?" says she sweetly. "A pretty name, I think: I have always liked it. I will call you by it, if you wish me to do so."

There is a fatigue in her voice that she cannot altogether conquer.

"Do!" entreats he, brightening. "The other name is so—so cold. I begin to hate it. It seems to keep us somehow miles apart."

"Does it?" She twists a gold bangle round and round upon her arm in a slow, reflective fashion.

"Yes—of course it does. Just consider. How would you like me to call you Miss Heriot, eh?"

"Ah, if that were so!" cries she suddenly; and then as suddenly she checks herself. She draws her hand from his because it is trembling so, and averts her face lest he should see the pallor of it.

"You see? it brings it home to you, doesn't it?" declares he triumphantly, noticing nothing, and placing his own construction on her words. He is slow to follow her at any time. "Well, you will call me George for the future, won't you?"

She nods a gentle acquiescence, but for all that she does not do it; and in spite of the dulness with which nature has unkindly endowed him, there is still sufficient pride about him to make her studied avoidance of the more familiar appellation very noticeable to him, and to prevent his again entreating her to use it.

He leaves her presently, and in a slightly offended frame of mind skates idly down the entire length of the lake. It seems to him at the moment that it will be a good thing to place some distance between them. Felix, whose eyes happen to fall upon him as he urges on his wild career, sees that he is not only surely, but swiftly making for a spot marked "Dangerous." A rotten post, now grown sadly dissipated in appearance, and inclining with a drunken gravity towards the ground, warns all intending skaters of this dark spot; but, as usual, those whom this warning should most concern are the last to see it.

Clanbrassil, for example, skates bravely towards it, with head erect and heart full of love-troubles, but with no anticipation of a coming accident.

Felix watches him. There possibly may be no real danger about the forbidden spot; and a savage longing to see this man, who had robbed him of his all, humiliated before his beloved seizes upon him with a pleasurable

strength. All at once he beholds him in his imagination dragged out, all dripping, his clothes falling in limp folds around him, his hair hanging over his face—a shivering, most unromantic figure—a sorry thing, fit only for the laughter of the lookers-on. Besides, what business is it of *his* to rush to the rescue of all the world? The man has eyes, as well as he; let him use them.

A second later he is hurrying with all his might after his unsuspecting rival.

“Clanbrassil!” he calls out lustily, when he is still some distance from him, and shortly after seizes him by the arm, and by sheer force brings him to a standstill. The sudden collision nearly upsets them both.

“Anything the matter?” asks Clanbrassil vaguely, trying to keep his balance and barely succeeding. “You have very nearly thrown me. Anything wrong, eh?—Miss Heriot?”

“Don’t you see where you are going?” exclaims Felix impatiently, with an ungracious frown. He is considerably out of breath, and Clanbrassil’s last two words have added to his temper. “Have you no eyes? Unless you have a fancy for being ‘found drowned,’ or playing the fool before all these people, you will keep away from this corner. Can’t you see it is marked ‘Dangerous’?”

“N-o: can you?” demands his lordship, peering into the twilight with undiminished good-humour. “Where, eh?”

“There,” returns Felix curtly, pointing to the embecile post, which, indeed, is now so drooping as to be of little use as a warning.

“Ah! by Jove! That crazy old thing! Who’d have thought it dangerous?” exclaims Clanbrassil, laughing. “Never saw it until this moment, I give you my word. I should have gone straight on to my destruction but for you. Thanks, awfully, my dear fellow. I’m really more obliged than I can say.”

“You needn’t,” returns Felix, unpleasantly. “It cost me nothing; not the slightest inconvenience even, as I happened to be coming this way. If it had, I should probably have left you to your fate.”

"Oh no, you wouldn't," says Clanbrassil, amiably. "I know you better than that. It's deuced nice of you to make so little of it. Why, but for you, I might at this moment be drowning, or freezing to death, or, at all events, cutting a very forlorn figure, and before all those girls, too. If you haven't saved my life, you have my reputation, at all events."

He laughs again, as though in imagination a witness of his own discomfiture, which, in the smallness of a vague idea, seems to amuse him. Then he suddenly grows grave again.

"It would have been horrid cold, eh?" he says, with an appreciative shiver, given to a knowledge of the discomfort that might have been his but for Felix's timely warning. "I only hope," he goes on with a grateful effusiveness that blinds him to the real meaning of his words, "that the day may come when I may be able to do the same for you."

"I hope it won't," returns Felix grimly.

"Eh? Oh! ah! just so! Ha, ha!" cries his lordship with a merry roar. "What an ass I made of myself just then, eh? Well, all right; you know what I mean, eh? I'm altogether obliged to you for keeping me from making a fool of myself, and before Miss Heriot too!"

Felix, turning about somewhat abruptly, skates away into the gathering gloom.

CHAPTER XXV.

"My grief lies all within."

OF all those assembled on the lake, Imogen alone had seen the peril that threatened Lord Clanbrassil. She had seen him skating towards the forbidden spot, had started up as if to warn him of the danger lying before him, and had been attracted by Felix's figure, as it dashed past her to the rescue. Yes, she had seen, and had fully understood—all!

It is an hour later. The shadows are beginning to creep, and Lady Olivia, feeling that she and her contemporaries have suffered enough for the young folk for one day, has called a meeting, and has declared her intention of returning to a fireside forthwith. She is ably seconded by the two other mothers of the party; and, having seen all the skaters safely off the lake, departs for The Chevies, carrying with her Patricia, who is anxiously looking forward to the evening post.

Now the eldest Miss Darnley being afflicted with "neives," and having been told by one of the dowagers (little Miss De Lisle's mother) that she must drive home with Sandie, who is a notoriously reckless driver, has flatly rebelled.

"Go home with Sandie Heriot she will not," she declares in a high hysterical key that makes itself heard far and near.

Captain Heriot and Sylvia Yelverton, looking vaguely round for support in this emergency, find Patricia has gone with Lady Olivia, and that Imogen is nowhere to be seen.

"Be sensible, Penelope," says Mrs. De Lisle severely (she is Miss Darnley's aunt); "be sensible! Mr. Heriot

has been driving, he tells me, since he was five years old. He cannot be a bad whip."

"Then why not entrust Lilian to him?" demands Miss Darnley tearfully.

(Lilian is the fair De Lisle.)

"Lilian has a bad headache. She is safer with me," retorts the dowager sternly, casting a malignant glance at the demure Lilian, who has been flirting disgracefully the entire day with the penniless Sandie, to the wrathful indignation of her enraged parent.

"Sandie, say something, my dear fellow. Reassure Miss Darnley in any way you can," entreats Captain Heriot anxiously.

"I won't!" says Sandie sullenly. "Catch me at it! I've been cajoled into wasting half my day with her on the ice, and I'll do no more. I can't bear her. She clung to me like a limpet, and actually expected me to flirt with her. I tell you I'd rather walk home than drive her."

"Never heard such rubbish," declares Tom, with all a brother's delightful candour. "You're simply angry with the poor girl because you can't drive home with that little absurd De Lisle, and you quite forget she had nothing to do with it. She is a most amiable, good tempered girl."

"So she is; and the prettiest in the barony," acquiesces Sandie enthusiastically.

"Who? I am speaking of Penelope Darnley," explains Captain Tom severely.

"Eh? Ah! it would take a fellow from Scotland Yard to discover who you were talking about," returns Sandie wrathfully; "and if it is Penelope you are crying up as good-tempered, I only wish you had seen her just now, when I stumbled a bit, quite accidentally, and she came on her knees on the ice. She blew me almost into fine dust, sweet as she is. The delightful skittishness you so much admire deserted her then, I can tell you; and she looked as if she would have sworn at me like a mosstrooper had she only known how."

"Well, you certainly can't go home with Miss De Lisle," says Sylvia; "her mother has quite made up her mind about that."

"Very good," returns Sandie, shrugging his shoulders: "but I just as certainly won't go home with Penelope."

How it would have ended nobody knows, had not Miss Darnley herself, driven to extremities, arranged matters. Going up to her cousin, Lord Clanbrassil, she boldly throws herself upon his tender mercies.

"You are, I firmly believe, the only man here," she says, "who knows how to drive."

Having thus flattered his vanity, and enchained his attention, she goes on:

"They are condemning me to go home with Sandie Heriot in that absurd little carriage that a stone would throw over, and with those flighty ponies. Save me from such misery as that; say you will drive me."

"My dear Penelope, do not ask me that," entreats Clanbrassil earnestly; "you know I have Imogen under my care."

"My dear George," returns Miss Darnley desperately, "you *must* drive me, or you will have my death to answer for. I will not trust myself to that harebrained boy, who sulks perpetually, and knows nothing whatever of the subtle workings of the wily horse. The sudden and terrible boundings are as nought to him! He can see no malice in the cocking of the creature's ears! In a word, he fails to understand the steed, so foolishly misnamed as "*noble!*" I assure you, my dear George, that now my nerves have been raised to such a pitch that I would rather camp here all night, and make my lodging upon the cold ground, than trust myself to anybody but you."

Clanbrassil casts a glance at the ponies to be driven by Sandie, and sees that they are, indeed, unquestionably in a very lively mood, and that the small groom who stands at their head has as much as he can do to hold them. They are pawing the ground merrily, and are throwing little flecks of foam right and left from their impatient little jaws. He thinks of Sandie's ready hand with the whip, and, looking once more at his cousin's dolorous countenance, relents.

"But who is to look after Imogen?" he asks in a troubled tone. "And by-the-bye, where *is* Imogen?"

"I saw her go towards the wood half an hour ago," says Captain Hardy, speaking in a smothered tone from beneath the body of a horse, where he is busily adjusting a strap; "somebody ought to follow her, and say we are on the move."

"Heriot, you go!" exclaims Clanbrassil distractedly.

"*Can't*, my dear fellow. I've got my hands full," returns Tom coolly, who has heard nothing of Penelope's entreaties, and who, therefore, sees no reason why Clanbrassil should not himself go in search of the woman he affects. "Here, Felix, you are doing nothing," he cries aloud presently; "go and see where Imogen is, and tell her we are all going home."

"Yes, do go, Brown; there's a good fellow!" adds Clanbrassil beseechingly; "and—and just explain to her—will you?—how it was I was put in for my cousin. She's an awful nuisance, poor thing!" says his lordship in a heart-broken whisper; "but what can a fellow do when a girl comes crying to him! You'll see to Miss Heriot, won't you, and bring her home safely, and tell her exactly how it was—eh? Remember I leave her to you."

And without waiting for a reply, Clanbrassil obeys an excited summons from Penelope, who has been startled by a swish of the ponies' tails, who are now in mad haste to be gone.

Felix, feeling half benumbed, looks after him. But it is too late for refusal or retreat of any kind. The situation has been forced upon him. It is none of his own making; yet he is, nevertheless, compelled to accept it.

Both Lady Olivia and Patricia have long since departed, so that Felix finds himself literally deserted in his hour of need, with no possible chance before him of being able to evade this *tête-à-tête* drive home with Imogen. From that moment—when in the bitterness of his spirit he had shown her all his heart and the miserable disappointment of it, standing amongst the dead leaves that strewed the path of living, glowing spring—he had drawn back from her, and had sought in every available way to avoid her society. And now—now—to have her thrown upon his hands in this curt fashion is terrible to him!

With a muttered protest against his ill-luck, he moves slowly in the direction of the wood. A sense of self-contempt is gnawing at him. Why had he left himself open to be the victim of a situation such as this? He should have left The Chevies the day after his arrival—excuses are plentiful in these rapid times: better still, he should never have come there a second time.

He had persuaded himself that in staying on he was but honourably helping her out of a difficulty; but in truth he had been *glad* to stay; glad to be anywhere within sound of her voice, within sight of her face, yet knowing all the time that he was thus permitting himself to hunger and thirst for one who was the promised wife of another. Was it manly, decent, upright? Pah! A loathing of himself oppresses and weighs him down. Yet his sin has carried with it its own punishment. If to be absent from her is torture, to be present with her—to know each hour by a thousand little signs that she belongs to Clanbrassil—is hell!

The paths are covered with snow; the heavy branches, laden with it, are bowing down before him as he walks mechanically onwards. What is he to say to her when he meets her? Perhaps she, ignorant of the pressure laid upon him, will imagine he connived at this arrangement, by which he and she are thrown into a complete insolation. His colour rises as this last odious doubt occurs to him, until his very brow grows dark. He throws up his head, and shuts his teeth with a little click. The very thought of it has galled his pride cruelly.

To avoid all this mental misery, what can be easier? To turn round and go home again, and leave it impossible to her to accuse him of such baseness—what can be simpler? It is the knowledge that he cannot do all this that kills. He must meet her—he must bring her home: there is no one else. No! there is no escape.

Even as he so thinks he turns a corner, and there is Imogen before him, seated upon the fallen stump of an elm, pale, and with a rather compressed expression round her lips. On seeing him, the pallor gives way to a vivid crimson. She moves slightly, involuntarily, as though her

inmost desire is to rise and leave him; but with the effort comes failure, and she sinks back again upon her temporary lounge with a quick, impatient sigh.

Misfortune has followed her into this frozen wood, and indeed she is in sadder plight than Felix dreams of. With a vague, unexpressed desire for solitude, she had wandered away from the skating-party, wrapt in strange musings, only to discover that a wood in February is not quite the same thing that it is in June. She had shivered. Each moment her thoughts had grown more gloomy, With a little eloquent movement full of disgust she had at last discontinued her walk, and decided upon giving up her solitary communing with a Nature so unsympathetic, and returning to where there may be given her a chance of getting back immediately to The Chevies.

Already, as she looked around upon the darkening landscape, it seemed to grow too late to catch the others. With a sensation of sudden fear she broke into a little run along the frozen path. A short-lived run! Her foot coming accidentally upon a tiny pool of rain-water thoroughly iced, she slipped and came heavily to the ground.

She raised herself hurriedly, and thinking nothing of so trifling an accident, once more made haste to rejoin her party. But presently a strange, unpleasant tingling in her right foot, that in a few moments grew into a prodigious pain, compelled her at last to stop and seat herself upon the fallen trunk of a tree close by. She was in a sorry state, maimed, disabled, with no one within call.

For fully half an hour she suffered thus in mind and body; and then—the last man in all the world she would have called to her rescue suddenly appeared to her.

The quick flush born on his first appearance dies, and the old lovely but unloving paleness reasserts itself. Felix, regarding her, grows strangely angry.

“At last I have found you!” he says, with a quick frown. There is a suspicion of polite boredom in his eyes and voice.

“You have given yourself some trouble—I can see that,” returns Imogen slowly. “But why?”

“Because it grows late; because the others have all gone

home; because you should be told of it by someone," returns he indifferently, as if not caring to pick or choose his words.

"Gone!"—there is haughty disbelief in the glance she turns upon him now. "Gone! impossible! Where, then, is Lord Clanbrassil?"

"Gone too," answers Felix, shrugging his shoulders nonchantly. "His cousin, Miss Darnley, discovered she had 'nerves' at the last moment, and refused to drive home with anyone but him. What could he do?"

He shrugs his shoulders again, but not even the ghost of a smile illumines his features.

"Well?" says Miss Heriot coldly.

"Well, he commissioned me to find you—to bear to you his apologies—to bring you home. He himself chose me as messenger." As though unable to control himself, he here breaks into a short unmirthful laugh. "Yes, it was me he chose!" he says.

"I do not understand his treating me in this manner," returns Imogen, very pale and proud. "But of course he will explain later on; you have failed to do so."

"I have told you all—there is no further explanation," replies he indifferently.

He looks away from her across the snow-clad valley far below, and gives a little slow, meditative stroke to his moustache. His manner is carelessly absent, and accords but badly with the passionate sense of desertion that is raging in her breast. Somehow this apparent coolness of his adds fire to her already smouldering anger.

"And where was Tom—Sandie?" she asks, in a stifled tone.

She might as well have said openly, "Where was *any* one but you?"

"Harassed with engagements they could not break. I alone seemed idle. Your sister's early return with Lady Olivia left me most *unfortunately* free."

Miss Heriot's teeth close upon her lips with a certain cruelty.

"Your candour is remarkable," she says. "Let me at least imitate it so far as to say that I am sorry they compelled you to come."

"So am I," returns Felix, unmoved. "It was none of my doings, believe me. I beg you to understand, Miss Heriot, that if I could have avoided this meeting, I would have done so." Anyone might see what a powerful control he is laying upon himself. Then all at once he bursts out: "Do you imagine," he cries vehemently, "that I *sought* this interview? I tell you I would have done anything to avoid it! It was abhorrent to me!"

"Why do you say so much? I know it," replies she calmly. "What I do not know—what I cannot understand—is, why you are here and Clanbrassil absent: I am thinking only of that, believe me."

"I thought"—coldly—"I had explained everything—his enforced desertion and my presence. Pray do not blame Clanbrassil!" He lowers his eyes, and a little mischievous smile, as cold as it is cruel, curves the corners of his lips. "I shall feel always as if I were to blame should a lover's quarrel arise out of this meeting."

Imogen grows deadly white; to control one's blood is difficult. She makes him no answer, but laying her hand against the trunk of the tree, brings herself to a standing posture.

"It grows late," she says simply.

The movement, however, has caused her face to flush with a pang of keenest pain. Felix is quick to notice it.

"What is it? Have you hurt yourself?" he asks hurriedly.

"I have bruised my foot slightly in some awkward way; but it is nothing," returns she icily.

"Perhaps you had better let me help you——"

"No, thank you. I can walk quite well without any assistance.

So she does, for a little bit; then, in spite of all her heroism, a faint groan escapes her.

"You are suffering," says Felix anxiously; "why do you deny it? What have you done to yourself? Was it now, when you got up from that fallen trunk, or——"

"No; it was about half an hour ago it happened. It is a mere strain of the muscles, I imagine, and will be of no consequence whatever. Where is the carriage to meet me?"

"At the end of this pathway, where the road joins it. In the meantime, I would advise you to sit still until I can bring you assistance."

"You overrate my pain. I assure you there is no necessity," returns she ungraciously.

She hobbles on a little way, but her face grows ghastly. To him this is the keenest torture.

"Why will you do yourself this great injury?" he exclaims at last angrily. "Do you know what it will lead to? I implore you to be careful! Or"—he looks down at her unwillingly—"shall I *carry* you? I think it will be better. I dare say"—with a glance at the winding path that lies between them and the waiting phaeton—"I could carry you so far without breaking down."

"I have told you that I can walk," says Imogen decisively.

Her mouth is pale with pain, but she will not give in. He has drawn her hand upon his arm in a manner that prevents objection, and she lets it remain there, but plainly under protest. The path is uneven, and rough with little loose stones here and there. Felix, watching every step she takes with a heart sick with anxiety for her, sees with anguish that she has stumbled over one of those loose pebbles, and is silently enduring agonies.

"What obstinacy this is!" he exclaims, stopping short. "You are acting as one without sense. Give in, can't you?—if only for your own sake. If you will only give me permission to take you in my arms to the end of this path, see what suffering it will spare you—and me! It is only a few yards: the distaste you may experience will last but for a moment."

"I prefer the pain of this moment," returns she with a curious smile.

"As you will, then," says Felix with a shrug; "but if it is so distasteful to you to be helped by me, I should advise you to rest here until I go home and bring Lord Clanbrassil to you."

"Not Clanbrassil," interrupts she so hastily as to suggest the idea that anger is in her heart for that unfortunate man.

"It is absurd to blame him for what has happened," says Felix steadily; "he could not possibly help it. Any one would have acted quite as he did."

"Have you constituted yourself his champion?" asks she, with a little flash from her large eyes that are now dark and brilliant with pain.

She has sunk again upon the bank close by, and has drawn the swollen, injured foot as much out of sight as possible.

"I think it necessary you should know the truth," returns he calmly. "Clanbrassil, you should remember, when sending me upon this errand, was not aware that any misfortune had befallen you."

"Ah!" cries she, as a sudden terrible twinge of pain shoots through her; "how I wish he *had* known!"

"This is horrible!" exclaims Felix, turning pale. "I should not have let it come to this. I implore you to take pity on yourself. Let me carry you!"

"No, no!" she murmurs vehemently.

She makes an effort to rise once more; and even as she does so, the last vestige of her colour departs from her cheeks and she falls forward into his arms in a dead faint.

Felix feels the blood mounting to his brow as his embrace enfolds her. Now, for this one moment at least, she is his. Her head has dropped against his arm; and her perfect face, lovely even in its pallor and its insensibility, is uplifted to his. The long, dark lashes trail upon the cheek; the haughty lips have lost their coldness, and now look calm and sweet and placid as might those of the dead.

An uncontrollable longing to gather her to his heart and press his lips to those mute ones beneath (that now for the first time seem to smile kindly at him) takes possession of Felix. So strong, so wild in this longing that he bends over her; his heart is beating madly; almost his face has touched hers, when, as if stricken by some mortal blow, he draws back.

Her very helplessness has appealed to him. With a sense of horror at the nearness of his guilt, he takes her up in his arms, and, with a set mouth and stern brow that speak of deepest self-reproach, he carries his beloved burden up the

woodland path to where he hopes the turn will reveal to him the waiting groom and carriage.

It is a long, rambling path, and once or twice it occurs to Felix that it seems even longer than it really is. He is a strong man, but a full-grown, healthy young woman is no light weight; and it is no disgrace to his manhood to confess that when at last the end of the path is reached, he is rather glad than otherwise. To hold your beloved in your arms is one thing; to have to carry her for half a mile is quite another.

As yet, the turn that hides them from the road hides them also from the carriage and the groom's eyes. Felix, unwilling to make the situation known to the servant—fearing gossip later on that would certainly wound Imogen, pauses nervously to think what is best to be done.

As he hesitates, she stirs slightly in his arms, and a warmer colour creeps slowly into her lips. Kneeling gently on one knee, Felix places her tenderly upon the high sloping bank that skirts the path, and, still supporting her, rests her figure against the trunk of a huge beech-tree.

A tremulous sigh escapes her, and a little swift flutter runs across her lids. Even as Felix (supporting her against a heart that now is beating madly with a painful uncertainty as to how she will accept the service he has done her) watches her, the heavily fringed lids uplift themselves, and Imogen's eyes look earnestly into his.

There is something at once so vague, so far away, yet so intense in this glance that Felix colours hotly.

"It is you," she says at last, slowly and very softly. She has hardly yet returned from the land where her spirit has been wandering.

"Yes."

"What was it—did I faint?"

"That is too important a word for it. You lost consciousness for a few moments; nothing more."

"And—how did I come here?" with a languid glance over his shoulder at the long path up which he had borne her.

"I brought you," returns he steadily. "It could not be avoided. You must forgive me; I ——" he pauses: "if

there had been any other way, I would have spared you—that.”

“You have been very kind,” returns she gently. She sighs again.

“The carriage is round that corner. If you could manage, with my assistance, to—to walk to it, I think it would be better,” says Felix hurriedly.

It is terrible to him to be alone with her when she is in this softened mood.

“Yes, much better.” exclaims she quickly, awaking suddenly into a fuller life. A faint blush dyes her cheeks; she looks at him very eagerly. “I should not like—mamma would be frightened if she knew I had fainted,” she says, in a low tone.

The blush has deepened on her face; there is something in her expression that tells him she knows he has read between the lines of this speech.

“Naturally. There is, however, no reason why Lady Olivia, or *anyone*, should ever hear about it,” he replies coldly. He had found it impossible to avoid laying that slight emphasis upon the “anyone.” “And now, do you feel strong enough to venture?”

He bends over her. Laying her hand upon his shoulder, she rises, with some help from him, to her feet; and with his arm almost round her, manages to reach the waiting phaeton.

“Miss Heriot has sprained her foot,” says Felix to the groom, and, with a slow but dexterous movement, he lifts her and lays her down amongst the cushions he has arranged, for her; the groom springs in at the back; the stout little cob starts off at a brisk trot, and they are on their homeward way.

It is a singularly silent drive. Once he turns and asks her if she is cold, and she answers “No!” in a constrained fashion, without lifting her eyes. Something in her tone belies her words, and Felix, with an involuntary longing to know the truth, lays his hand suddenly upon one of hers that is lying ungloved upon the bearskin that covers her. It is cold as ice. With a smothered ejaculation Felix takes up a huge wrap, and envelops her in it, folding it round

and round her with a stern strength that refuses to listen to the low-toned protests she is uttering. She does not throw off the wrap, however, until they draw up at the hall-door of The Chevies.

Here Felix would have helped her to alight, but she shrinks from him; and Captain Heriot hurrying forward at the moment from under the portico, she entrusts herself to him, and hobbles, with the help of his arm, into the house and upstairs to her own room.

Doctor Bland being fortunately upon the spot, examines her foot at once, and having pronounced the injury to be "painful, but not serious," Imogen declines to go to bed.

"No; she will be very quiet, *very*. She will lie upon the lounge in Lady Olivia's boudoir, and will promise not to stir; but if the others might come and sit with her after dinner, it would be a comfort and relieve the monotony of it; and she would not stir, really—not once."

Doctor Bland, being a victim to her blandishments, gives in to this; and by-and-by her mother's boudoir is as gay with light and laughter as ever was the now-deserted drawing-room downstairs. After dinner, all the guests had gathered there, rather amused than otherwise at having their tea given them in such a little cosy, dainty, blue-satiny affair, where, for the most part, huge downy foot-stools, clothed in all the most impossible shades in plush, took the place of the more orthodox chairs. And yet not quite all had elected to enter this little paradise. Sandie is absent, and Miss De Lisle, who has for once escaped from her mother's clutches, and—Felix Brown.

Clanbrassil had, of course, been the first to see Imogen after her accident became generally known. He had been silent and low spirited all through dinner, as a true lover should be, and had hurried upstairs immediately afterwards to bend over her and express again the real grief he is feeling and the regret that is consuming him. She is looking lovely amongst her crimson satin cushions, with her fair hair a little loosened, and the flush of a now-dying pain upon her cheeks; but, though calm and gracious as usual, Clanbrassil finds her a little *distracte*, and moves away from her couch presently, with a last entreaty that

she will be careful to retire early and avoid all feverish symptoms.

But ten o'clock finds her still up, and still strangely wide-eyed, and flushed and restless.

"Darling," murmurs Lady Olivia, whispering to her, "don't you think bed is the best place for you? You are looking *so* feverish, and I know you are suffering pain. Let me persuade you to do what is wise. Surely you have stayed up long enough to ensure a good night's rest." Then, as if with a sudden inspiration—"Are you waiting for anyone? Would you like to see Clanbrassil again before Varian comes?"

Varian is the maid.

"No—no!" declares Imogen—quickly, eagerly—blushing vividly as she speaks. "I want no one. But I am not tired yet. I feel so well, so wakeful. Do not press me to go *yet*."

There is something that might almost be termed pleading in her whole air.

"I do hope you won't overdo it," breathes Lady Olivia, with a little sigh. "But you *look* tired!"

She tucks the filmy shawl that is burdening Imogen's shoulders still more closely round her, and turns away. As she does so, the sound of footsteps in the corridor outside can be heard. Even nearer and nearer they come until they reach the door, and then—they pass it! At the same time a clear ringing laugh full of gaiety reaches the ears of those in the boudoir. It is an irrepressible laugh, rich in joy.

"Do you know," says Penelope Darnley, with that little air of laying down the law that belongs to her, "I do think Mr. Brown has one of the most perfect laughs I ever heard. There is no humbug about it!"

She glares round upon her companions as if to suggest the dark possibility of there being considerable humbug about *them*.

"Mamma!"—Imogen had risen upon her elbow a moment ago, but now sinks back again as if exhausted, "you were right," she says, with a languid smile, as Lady Olivia looks down at her with troubled eyes. "I *am* tired. I should like to go to bed now—after all!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

"The forest music is to hear the hounds
Rend the thin air, and with a lusty cry
Awake the drowsy echo, and confound
Their perfect language in a mingled voice."

"IMOGEN," says Sir Hugh, about three weeks later on, "if you really *mean* hunting to-morrow, you will have to be up betimes, I can tell you. We shall have to start more than usually early. Ogley's Farm is about the farthest meet we have."

"I'll be ready," Imogen assures him, with a faint smiling nod.

True to her word, she is in the breakfast-room next morning, long before the others, equipped perfectly for the day's chase, even to the dainty riding-whip with its jewelled handle a present from Lord Clanbrassil.

Felix is the first to follow her.

"What you !" he exclaims with genuine surprise. "I hardly expected you would show at all at such an ungodly hour."

"It is an excitement ; I like it. The very early morning has always had its charm for me."

"I have not asked you about it for the last day or two, but is your foot quite well now ?"

"Quite well, thank you."

Clanbrassil, entering the room at this moment, puts an end to all further civilities. He had ridden over from his own place, and Sir Hugh appearing upon the scene almost in his train, they go to breakfast and start for the distant meet directly afterwards ; Miss Heriot and the legitimate lover riding on well in front, Sir Hugh and the discarded lover bringing up the rear.

On their way they fall in with Sylvia Yelverton, attended only by a groom (Captain Heriot rejoined his regiment quite a week ago), who calls aloud to them gaily that she has come this route with the express hope of meeting them, and is therefore for once in her life (saucily) unfeignedly glad to see them.

"But what has happened to you, O knight of the rueful countenance?" she asks Felix mischievously, having drawn rein beside him.

"Do I then look as though I were in sorry case?" demands he, smiling. "Madam, for once you err! It is the morning mist that is playing a treacherous game with your usually brilliant eyes."

"No." Sylvia shakes her bonny head with a little empathic meaning. "I am not blinded by anything. Come, what is it? Have you a presentiment that you will be slain to-day, or does some other evil menace you? The signs of woe upon your face speak loudly. Something cruel threatens you."

"Ah, if you know your fault, why do you not try to cure yourself of it?" says Felix tenderly. "Why will you persist in this cruelty of which, as you say, I am the victim?"

Sylvia casts a little sudden glance at him from under her long lashes, and then they both burst out laughing. Almost immediately afterwards they come within full view of the hounds as they stand clustered together in the hollow, seeming for the most part one seething mass of spotted skin and restless waving tails.

* * • • •

It is two hours later, and Miss Heriot, with heightened colour and warmed blood, is riding excitedly over everything that comes in her way to the occasional music of the running hounds.

Down the hill right opposite, deep into Spinners' valley, has disappeared the good dog-fox. It is already, even as far as it has gone, a run to be remembered for many a day, and dire and signal have been the instances of those who have come to grief. Sir Hugh is riding well forward, and Sylvia Yelverton is holding her own on the gallant little

chestnut that has carried her well and safely for many a day.

Lord Clanbrassil had come a severe cropper about half-an-hour ago, but had picked himself up and pulled himself together again like a good one, and is now steaming down the incline to the left with the evident intention of making up for lost time.

The pace all through, since first they broke cover, had been distinctly hot, and but few at this moment survive to tell the tale. It is left to some dozen or so to be in at the death, out of the good troop that rode forth in the morning, filled with a brave desire to do or die. Some, finding the race to be only to the swift, had wisely drawn rein very early in the day, and had solemnly plodded home again; others, more adventurous, and filled with a gallant but most mistaken fury, had trusted to fortune (that fickle jade!) to bring them safely through their brooks and hedges, and had come to a violent end. Of these last most of them are now either sitting or standing in water, dripping from elbows and knees, lamenting their fate, and cursing their goddess in terms the most unmeasured.

Of those who still are holding on, the greater part are riding to Imogen's left, down deep in the bosom of Milner's Chase; to her right rides only one, and that is Felix.

A passionate lover of sport of all kinds, and specially addicted to hunting, the keenest enjoyment that Felix knows is to have a good horse under him, with the certainty of a hard day's run in view. To-day his mount is undeniable, and he grows almost happy again.

Half-an-hour ago he, too, made a false move that left him something in arrear, and now he is crashing through and over everything that comes in his way to regain his former position. Sir Hugh, who is an old and wary horseman, has sailed along from the beginning straight in the line of victory, without a moment's swerve to left or right.

Just as Felix catches sight of him, and knows himself to be once more on the right tack, he finds he is on the same ground with Miss Heriot, only considerably higher up. The field is growing sparser every moment; most of the horses have given in by this time, and only the real

stayers are now showing any game. The hounds have streamed over the hill beyond as if in one body, so mute, so compact they run, whilst before them flies the good old fox, free from all signs of damage.

It is a lengthy meadow into which Felix has dropped, straggling and untidy in form, and so arranged by nature with mounds and hillocks that Imogen, at the lower end of it, can scarcely distinguish her companion at the top. Nevertheless, she makes a shrewd guess about him.

From where she is it is easy enough to get into the adjoining field; but from Felix's point of view it is very different. A short, ugly wall rises before him, surmounted by a prickly hedge, that effectually conceals from sight the heavy fall on the other side. Still, though decidedly a facer, it is not an impossible take: and Felix, whilst quite understanding the danger, determines to trust to his horse to carry him safely over, and, at all events, to risk it, come what may.

Imogen, who has let herself lightly into the field through a friendly gap, turns nervously in her saddle to see how it will end. She is wondering breathlessly if he knows of the dip on the far side, or if——

He is at the wall by this time, and she can see him give his horse a lift. The gallant creature rises obediently, springs eagerly, but springs short. He lands, indeed, at the other side, but in a hopeless way, and, plunging helplessly forward, brings himself and his rider heavily to the ground,

Imogen shuts her eyes, and presses her teeth so cruelly upon her under lip that she forces the blood to the surface. By a supreme effort she suppresses the scream that rises so naturally from her heart.

When again she summons courage to look up, she finds the horse has risen, and is standing trembling violently at some little distance, whilst on the grass lies motionless a mass of brilliant scarlet cloth and a gleam of sunburnt hair.

CHAPTER XXVII.

"Neither the sun nor death can be looked at steadily."

"Remorse is as the heart in which it grows :
If that be gentle, it drops balmy dews
Of true repentance."

SHE is on her knees beside him in a moment, with her arms round him. Her horse is idly wandering across the field, plucking at the bare tufts that winter has left the frozen grass. She has placed her shaking fingers on his heart, but fails to detect there the faintest beat? And his brow—it is cold, and damp, and chill; to her it seems touched by the awful hand of death.

A sense of horror takes possession of her. Is he *indeed* dead? Will he never speak again? Will those white lips know no unclosing? Will he never see again, or hear the common sounds of nature that even now in this terrible hour ring in her ears? Is he—this senseless thing upon her knees—this being so replete with life but a short five minutes ago—gone now beyond our following—beyond *this* world's life, and love, and hope for evermore?

She lifts his head upon her lap—alas! how unresisting it is!—and pushes back the hair from his beautiful forehead. She must have lost herself a little at this time, I think, because she begins to croon over him as a mother might, and murmurs to him tenderly, almost reproachfully, as if half believing that the voice he had loved so well yesterday—that *cruel* voice—will to-day recall him from the grave. She whispers to him, she calls aloud upon his name, but there comes to her no answer.

Presently she lifts her head and looks around her wildly. All is solitary; no living being is in sight. Will *nobody* come? Is this one field to be the only deserted spot in all

the world? Somebody must come soon; but oh, how long—how long it seems! Over that gap a man might come, or through that gateway, or——She pauses in her frenzied search for some one. A terrible thought has struck her. Will he who comes kneel just *there*, perchance, and lay his hand upon her silent love's heart, and tell her finally that help is useless—that he is indeed as dead as he appears to be—lifeless within her very arms? Oh no, dear Heaven; not *that*! Yet still let them come—come! Let her only be *sure*!

Oh, to speak with him once more—if only for the most meagre moment! How much contrition she could pour into that little space! She only asks for time to let him know how well she loved him always, and to beg upon her knees for his forgiveness.

Is it too late? Why does he lie so silent at her feet? Surely that sweet, calm smile that breathes of life has no great sympathy with death. The majestic surprise that belongs to death is not his. He *must* be living! And yet, even whilst thus hoping against hope, her courage gives way. She leans over him, despair fresh gathered in her eyes. Is she never to hear his voice again; never to see the loving tenderness that lived in his eyes for her alone?

Is all the world cruel or insensible, that none will come to her call, whilst perhaps each precious moment is stealing from him a last irrevocable chance? "This way madness lies!" She springs to her feet, and with outstretched arms cries aloud to heaven and earth; yet no one seems to hear. She falls upon her hands again, and begins to cry sorrowfully, and to wring her hands.

"Oh, Felix, *try* to speak to me!" she sobs passionately. "Oh, my love! *my love*! MY LOVE!"

* * * *

Lord Clanbrassil, a minute or two after the accident occurred, happening to turn round in his saddle to see if Miss Heriot is anywhere in sight, gets a full view of the later incidents. Two horses riderless upon the turf below first attract his attention, and, raising himself upon his stirrups to survey the ground more clearly, he notices in a far corner, half hidden by a pollard, a large dark blot upon

the green. It may or it may not be two figures. At all events, it *may*. This is enough for him.

"Look here, Sir Hugh!" he calls in stentorian tones to the baronet, who is riding along as if his life depended upon it; "look here, you know! See that thing in the corner on your left! Anything wrong, do you think? Can you see Imogen anywhere, eh?"

"Imogen! She wasn't a hundred yards behind me five minutes ago," replies Sir Hugh, startled; whereupon Clanbrassil waits for nothing further, but gallops back again furiously towards that indistinct shadow in the far corner. Sir Hugh, some instinct warning him of sure and certain danger, gives up his chance of glory and follows him.

Lying apparently lifeless, with one arm twisted half under him in that horrible formless way a broken limb *will* take, lies Felix. The pallor of death is on his face; and Imogen, kneeling beside him, holding his head upon her breast, is smoothing his soft hair, and moaning over him tender words and entreaties. Clanbrassil, coming suddenly upon this picture, feels his heart grow cold.

"Imogen!" he cries sharply, laying his hand upon her arm, as if with the intention of raising her from the ground; but she shakes him off roughly.

"What have *you* to do with us?" she asks repellently, lifting haggard eyes to his. "Go!—leave us! You have troubled us too long. Do you see him now? And I—loved him!" She leans towards Clanbrassil, and, as if forgetful of everything, whispers hoarsely, "Do you think he is *dead*? Not quite dead—not *quite*, perhaps!"

There is agonized entreaty in her forlorn question; but suddenly she seems to forget all about it, and turns back to the prostrate man again, and again pillows his head upon her bosom.

"Oh, Felix, speak to me!" she breathes desperately. "Hear me, *darling*! Have pity! have pity!" She breaks into wild sobs.

"What can be the meaning of all this?" asks Lord Clanbrassil in a cold tone full of misery, turning to her father. "Sir Hugh, you should know!"

Sir Hugh, who has been employing himself with the prostrate man, now lifts a rather pale face.

"I suppose, as she has said it, it is true," he returns simply; "but I give you my honour as a gentleman that I knew nothing of it until this moment. Some months ago, long before you proposed to her, she refused him. I fancied that conclusive, but who shall know a woman? *Why* she rejected him, I am as ignorant about as you are. It has been her own affair from first to last."

Imogen, looking up, breaks in upon this explanation.

"Is he dead?" she asks with curious calmness.

"No, no, my dear; I hope not," exclaims Sir Hugh hurriedly. He goes down upon his knees again, and gently lifting Felix, draws the smashed arm from under him. "A broken arm seldom kills," he goes on with a hopefulness he is far from feeling. He moves Felix with the greatest tenderness, and throwing back his coat opens his shirt and waistcoat, and lets the chill wind make free play upon his throat. "Clanbrassil! the brandy," he whispers anxiously.

Clanbrassil, who is almost as white as the lifeless body on the grass, kneels down beside Sir Hugh in a mechanical fashion, and handing his flask, begins to help him in the work of resuscitation.

"How will it be?" he asks in a rather stony way. He looks hard and strange, and as though he has suddenly grown very old.

"Who can say?" returns Sir Hugh with a nervous shrug. "We must only hope still. But I don't like the look on the poor lad's face! I have seen it before. You didn't know little Dolly Stuart, of the Coldstreams—eh? Before your time, I dare say. Well, he had just that sort of calm, half-smile upon his face, as though defying death, when they picked him up stone-dead off the field. Military races they were——"

"How shall we get him home?" interrupts Clanbrassil hoarsely. He has not been listening. "Is there no doctor to be found anywhere? I thought I saw Bland at the meet this morning."

"He was called away before the run——"

At this moment a sharp sound startles them. It comes from Imogen. She is kneeling, and her face as she lifts it to her father's is transfigured. Her hand is on Felix's chest.

"His heart!" she cries aloud; "his heart! *I can feel it!*"

True love, indeed, had proved the first discoverer of the great fact. Her eyes are illumined as she gives utterance to the sweet words, and Clanbrassil, staring miserably at her, can see the glorious light that hope has kindled in them. He looks at her, but she, in truth, has forgotten him—has let him go from her as though he never existed. Her white fingers are pressed closely against Felix's breast; there is a wild exultation in her tone; her breath is coming and going with a rapturous excitement; her whole form is filled with a passionate, glad expectation. She is altogether a new creature—a thing freshly born, when compared with the icy Imogen of yesterday!

Sir Hugh has not noticed the alteration in her so much as the awakened lover. The former, bending over the unconscious man, is eagerly searching for signs of life.

"She is right," he cries at last vehemently. "It does beat, Clanbrassil! Hurry, man—more brandy!"

Thus life, struggling back slowly and begrudgingly into Felix's frame, begins once more its swift, sad course within him. While for Clanbrassil, turning away sick at heart and crushed, what does life hold? Surely all its promises are but as rotten fruits—its joys a snare. They began in mockery, they find their grave in bitterness!

* * * * *

It is late the same evening: the curtains are closely drawn, and a very subdued lamp is burning on a distant table. All the cosy seats and cushions in Lady Olivia's boudoir seem sunk in obscurity; even the tiny silver teatray, with its gentle messengers so full of soothing properties, rests discarded upon its buhl table, and lets its little fat teapot steam away unnoticed.

Imogen, sitting before the fire, with one hand clasped close in Lady Olivia's, is gazing idly into it, looking pale

and dejected in the red light of the flames that now blaze up triumphantly, and now sink down again to zero, and yet ever spring to life again.

She is extremely pale, and her lips have taken a pathetic curve; yet, withal, there is a touch of irrepressible brightness about her—a suppressed but unutterable joyousness that betrays itself in spite of her bent head and lowered eyes. An hour ago, Dr. Bland, who had arrived very promptly upon Felix's arrival at The Chevies, had declared him though considerably injured, to be out of any immediate danger, and had further assured the anxious inquirers that, with care and time, his recovery will be a certainty.

To Imogen this news had been as a reprieve to one condemned! She had buried herself in her own apartments whilst suspense remained, refusing to see anyone, and spending her time walking feverishly to and fro with unspoken prayers within her breast, and a miserable despair all about her that threatened to conquer and destroy her. Stunned and wretched, and overpowered by the tremendous awakening that had come to her, and that had shown her her inmost soul, she sat in the fast-gathering twilight waiting for tidings that she yet shrank from hearing.

But when *hope* came!—when her mother, sobbing herself with joy, came to tell her that all was well for the present, she could find no words in which to express herself. She only caught her mother in her arms, and held her to her, and cried bitterly.

Lady Olivia had carried her away with her to her own room and there had listened to a short but earnest confession that had come from the girl's heavily burdened heart, and that breathed of an excess of misery borne for the past few months. In silence the mother had listened and wondered saying no word of blame, but only caressing with tender, encouraging fingers the fair, prostrate head that lay upon her knees.

Sir Hugh on his return had, of course, informed his wife of all that had occurred, and probably *more*—being carried away a good deal by his feelings—describing everything at a wearisome full length, with a wind-up that declared he had received a mental shock not easily to be forgotten. He

had been extremely fussy and discursive all through; but the mother's heart had divined the grain of truth in his farrago, and went out at once in pitying love to her child.

And now, here in the dark night of this cold unhappy day, a silence falls between the mother and child, that still speaks of renewed love and confidence between them, and of growing thoughts on either side that preclude the possibility of speech.

The door opening somewhat suddenly, and the brusque pushing aside of the thick curtain that guards it, rouse them from their reveries.

A moment, and a servant stands revealed.

"Lord Clanbrassil's compliments to Miss Heriot, and he would be glad to see her for a few minutes—in the north drawing-room," adds the careful domestic.

Imogen grows ghastly pale. She lowers the hand that holds her fan until it lies prone upon her knee. Why should it be in anyone's power to say that it trembled?

"I shall be down directly, Thomas," she says, quite calmly though she is shaking in every limb. Then, when the door is closed again, she turns desperately to her mother, "O mother!" she cries, "what can I say to him? He saw all; he knows all! What must he think of me?"

"I'll go!" says Lady Olivia heroically. "I'll take it all upon myself. I'll explain to him how——"

"Oh, no, no!" interposes Imogen mournfully. "I am the one in fault. I must be the one to confess it. Yes, I must go to him."

"Well, *do* take a cup of tea first, at all events!" entreats her mother, earnestly, going over to the deserted tea-tray. To her, tea is a panacea for all evils. "It isn't very cold yet; and it is sure to do you good."

"Ah, *nothing*!" says Imogen, who has risen, and is looking pale as a ghost. "I feel as if I should never like anything again. If that feeling were only to prove true"—with a little faint smile—"what an amount of trouble it would save me! I should die off so simply and unobjectionably, and presently be forgotten."

"My dear, how ghastly, how unpleasant a thought!" exclaims Lady Olivia, in a horrified tone. She goes up to

her daughter and lays her hand upon her arm as though to assure herself of her well-being. "It—it isn't lucky, darling, to talk like that," she says in a frightened way. The superstitions of her beloved North still cling to her.

"Don't dwell on it; it is all bombast," says Imogen, with a self-disdainful laugh, "I wouldn't die really, even if I could. But"—her smile fades, and she sighs deeply—"I would not go downstairs if I could help it."

"Take courage!" entreats Lady Olivia tenderly, looking at her with the fondest commiseration; and then, "Take a glass of sherry," she says, as though it were the accompaniment of the other.

Wines of different sorts are lying upon a distant table. The guests at the Chevies are so numerous and so diverse that one never knows where they may be received, and therefore, with the tea, quaint, long lipped bottles and many coloured glasses are carried here and there during the afternoon.

"I want only one thing," murmurs Imogen, "and that is, to be back here again with you, with this terrible ordeal at an end."

"Well, if you won't have anything else," says Lady Olivia pathetically, "at least take my advice—own the truth at once! Plain speaking, believe me, is ever the best. Later on he will forgive you; and, at all events, if he doesn't he ought. That's a comfort, any way. To have him in the wrong, you know, will make one's self so right! And there's another thing, dearest: what a blessing it is, under the circumstances, that you were not compelled to borrow that money from him!"

"Yes; but I must—that is, I mean I cannot—forget he would have given it," says Imogen, growing very crimson.

"Still, he made a hesitation about it." Lady Olivia grows unkind.

"Yes; certainly there was the hesitation," says Imogen; and after this Lady Olivia has the gratification of knowing that she has given her some little moral backbone wherewith to meet the impending interview.

"Don't be long," she intreats, as Imogen moves slowly towards the door. "There isn't much to be said, after all;

and remember how impatiently I shall be awaiting your return."

"You—you think he will fully understand that now all is at an end between us?" asks Imogen, turning on the very threshold, and catching her mother anxiously by the hand.

"My dear, of course!"

But as she says it, she feels a pang of quick disappointment at her heart. Imogen is no longer poor. There is no reason why she should marry anyone unless fancy compelled her; and yet a titled son-in-law——

"Go—go, darling," she says, giving Imogen a gentle push. "Do not leave him in suspense any longer."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

"I cannot speak, tears so obstruct my words."

"He that cannot forgive others breaks the bridge over which he must pass himself. For every man has need to be forgiven."

As she crosses the threshold of the room in which Lord Clanbrassil is awaiting her, a sudden rush of memory almost overpowers Imogen. On that other night, only a few short weeks ago, she had stood before him as she stands now—alone, but under what different circumstances! Then she had come to offer him, of her deliberate will, all he counted dearest upon earth—herself. Now, she is come to deprive him of that gift. She waits in silent shame before him, judged and condemned.

Has she not given to another what it was no longer in her power to give? Her word passed that betrothed her to Clanbrassil, she had still openly, most dishonestly, let her heart stray into the keeping of his rival. It is a terrible moment; and scarcely daring to raise her head lest she should read the just anger in his eyes, she stays, shame stricken, for him to accuse her, her gaze bent sorrowfully downwards. Her attitude, in spite of her humiliation, only serves to heighten her grace. She looks like a drooping lily, a pathetic creature, crushed but exquisite.

"I am glad you have come," says Clanbrassil at last, in a voice that seems strange to her—so cold it is, so unloving, and with all the youth gone out of it. "I thought it better to lose no time over this affair; to get it over at once; to end this farce that has been already played between us too long!"

No answer from Miss Heriot, no movement, no sound even, save a little breath that is almost a sob.

"Why you should have elected to treat me as you have done is what I cannot understand," goes on Clanbrassil icily. "What great wrong had I done you, that punishment so dire should be laid upon me? When, a few weeks ago"—he breaks off sharply, and repeats again "weeks," as though struck by the sound—"can it only be weeks?" he cries aloud; "what long, long years away it seems! Did you mean, then, to accept that paltry money as the price of your affection? Affection! Pah! your toleration rather! Had I known then what I know now, I would have flung you from me rather than let you so degrade yourself and me!"

"Have you no pity?" murmurs she faintly.

"Had you none? Did no thought of the dreary future you so coldly planned out for us"—his face contracts as if with pain when the pronoun, so sweet to lovers, falls from his lips—"chill your heart at times? I, ever striving to gain a love beyond me; you, lost for ever in memories of past days that held for you all the sweetness of your life! Yet the thing is done; it cannot be undone. Of what use is it my thus reproaching you? Go your way without further word from me, since it can no longer be my way."

"If you would but listen!" she entreats feverishly.

All the pride seems gone out of her; her beautiful face, white with agitation, is lifted imploringly to his.

"I have listened too long already; if I had never heard you, I should be to-day a different man. My misery lies at your door. Hear me!" he cries aloud, as though beside himself, "and understand, at least, what it is that you have done. You have ruined completely the life of one man, and all but wrecked that of another, just for the sake of a little honesty."

"Alas! to think that you could be so cruel," murmurs she, the tears streaming down her cheeks.

"It is too late to expect mercy at my hands," returns he in a stifled tone.

He makes a movement, as if to pass her. Timidly she steps nearer to him, as if to detain him, but firmly, if gently, he puts her to one side. But she will not be thus repulsed. Holding out both her slender, trembling hands, she lays them upon his arm.

"Ah, George! you cannot leave me like this," she exclaims, with deepest grief. (It is the first time she has ever called him by his Christian name, and somehow, in some strange way, it touches him.) "I know, I confess, that in every sense I have behaved badly, basely, *cruelly* to you; and yet—I—No, don't mistake me," cries she hurriedly, seeing some subtle change upon his face; "I know well you would never marry me now, and" (lowering her voice) "neither could I ever marry you, having once shown you my heart. There can be no misconception about that; but I think if you knew everything—how wretched I was, how hopeless, how essential it was that the money should be procured, how terrible a thing it was to me to have to borrow it, and how just and proper a course it seemed, to give myself in exchange for it, having no other means of repayment—you might still despise, but you would surely pity me. Was ever girl in so sore a plight? And, indeed, I was not altogether bad. Could you have seen into my heart you would have read there how real was my determination to make up to you for my innocent treachery in all ways, to be true to you as never wife was before, to love you eventually, when time had mercifully softened all things, as I loved—that other!"

She breaks down here, and covers her face with her hands. Her tears run through her fingers, Clanbrassil's wrath melts before them; in truth, he has never yet learned the art of being consistently unkind to anything, and now, as he watches her, his wrath, his wrongs, *all* die away from him, and a choking sensation in his throat warns him that his unfruitful anger is at an end. To see her cry: to know himself, now his passion is at an end, to be the author of her tears, is the acutest anguish to him. Who is he that he should be the cause of tears to her?

"Don't do that," he exclaims savagely; but this time his anger is so evidently directed against himself, that Imogen's grief increases, and she sobs right heartily. "Ah! how could you so have treated me?" he says presently, in a broken voice; "why did you not let me alone? I was unhappy then, indeed; but now I am in torture. Then I had no hope, but you pressed that terrible thing into my

bosom, and when it was warm there, when it had found its home with me, you killed it. You taught me to believe that things I had deemed impossible of possession might yet be mine, and when I had permitted myself to listen to you, you turned your own teachings into a mockery."

"How could I tell that this would be the end?" asks Imogen in a low voice. "All might have been as different as I meant it to be, had this day never dawned."

"I do not regret it," returns Clanbrassil slowly. "Better to wake from a happy dream whilst yet there is time, than rest in blissful unconsciousness until the awakening comes too late. Bitter as it is to lose you now, it would be still more bitter to discover later on what I know to-day." He looks at her very sadly, and then, as though the words are wrung from his very soul, he says slowly, "I would we had never met!"

Imogen with a little shiver lays her face against his arm. Alas! how cruel a thing it has all been, to him, to her, to—to——

"If I might only do something," she whispers despairingly.

"That is out of your power. All you could say or do would not obliterate the past. You are crying still, Imogen," raising her face and regarding it mournfully; "are you, then, so very sorry for that evening's work? Well, well——"

He sighs heavily, and begins to walk restlessly up and down the room, whilst she stands apart, twining her fingers nervously in and out. The bitterness of her remorse just now makes half atonement for her sin; the very mildness of his rebukes, the gentle subduing of his just wrath, makes more keen her self-contempt.

"Why do you no longer reproach me?" she cries suddenly, as though almost angry with him. "Abuse me, speak harshly to me, do *anything* but act towards me as you are doing now. Your kindness kills me. Not all the cruel epithets you could heap upon me would punish me sufficiently for what I have made you suffer. Have you forgotten," she exclaims vehemently, "that it was I who actually thrust myself upon *you*?—that it was I who offered myself to you upon that fatal evening, not you who asked for me? Why do you not taunt me with all this? Must I put these

cruel thoughts into your head, because you are too noble to imagine them of your own accord? Ah! if you would only be unkind to me, I should not feel half so wretched."

Clanbrassil smiles, but very sadly.

"I have been brutal enough," he says wearily; "be contented. Strange as it may appear to you, all the detestation my heart held for you has somehow disappeared, leaving only love and forgiveness in its place. I am no longer angry; I am only sad, and, perhaps, a little lonely."

He turns away abruptly, and walks to a distant window.

"However," he says presently, speaking from the position he has taken up with an assumption of cheerfulness that does not deceive her, "time, as we know, cures all things. I shall not be such a woe-begone lover when next year is as old as this. They say travelling is a good thing for the vapours; and there is many a foreign city about which I would do well to jog my memory. But remember this,"—he comes back to her now, a strange earnestness in his tone, and lays his hand on hers—"whatever you do, whomsoever you may chance to marry, I wish you all the happiness and good fortune that may fall to the lot of the luckiest mortal."

"And—you are *sure* you forgive me?" whispers she tremulously, clinging to him.

"Entirely sure."

"Think of *all*——"

"Shall I ever cease to think of it?" Then, looking keenly at her: "You will, I suppose, marry Felix?"

"Oh, no! no!" cries she, shrinking from him.

"But you love him!"

"Ah! that is known only to you—to papa—to my mother. *He* knows nothing." Then, in a low tone: "From me he will never know it!"

There is a long pause.

"I must go," says Clanbrassil, straightening himself as one does who is about to make an effort that costs something.

"You are sure you forgive me?" asks she again, holding his hand in both of hers.

"With all my heart."

"And you will promise to forget me soon? and you will try to love some other woman—worthier, better?"

"Where shall I find her?" asks he, a deep yearning breaking through the assumed lightness of his tone.

"Too easily," returns she sadly; "there will be small difficulty about that. When you do meet her, promise me you will not steel your heart against her, nor deem all women unlovable because one proved false. I shall feel happier if you will promise that."

"Be happier, then. I shall think no woman false or unlovable because of you. And now—good-bye."

It is all over in a moment after that, and Imogen is left standing alone in the deserted drawing-room, with only her own thoughts for company—those saddest of all things.

CHAPTER XXIX.

"One hour of joy dispels the cares
And sufferings of a thousand years."

"Art thou not dearer to my eyes than light?
Dost thou not circulate through all my veins,
Mingle with life, and form my very soul?"

AFTER all, Felix does not seem to recover so rapidly as had been expected, the internal injuries he has received, though slight, telling upon him more seriously than the doctors had anticipated. Perhaps, too, a vague disinclination to take up again the pangs and sorrows of his everyday life has helped to retard his return to health.

Mrs. Brown had been telegraphed for on the evening of the accident, and had arrived at the Chevies early on the following morning, having travelled all night rather than endure the agonies of suspense, though the telegram had been carefully worded, and far from hopeless.

Old Brown had come with her; but when he had seen his son, and been recognised by him, and had been assured by the local surgeon and Lady Olivia that no immediate danger need be apprehended, had returned home again, well contented to leave his son in his wife's and Lady Olivia's care, who tended him alternately, assisted by a hired nurse of the most comfortable dimensions.

Upon the third day Felix woke from his insensibility, and showed symptoms of decided improvement. All were delighted, and hope reigned in every breast. He went through the dressing of his wounds with wonderful composure and admirable stoicism; he knew everybody, and addressed his mother and Lady Olivia by name; he looked bright and eager—and by nightfall was in a raging fever!

One of the most celebrated physicians of the day was

then summoned from town. What an age it appeared until the carriage brought him from the station, and with what ceremony they received him! The poor mother seemed to hang upon his very glances.

He came, and went through a formula that sounded exactly like what old Bland had said when bereft of its long sounding terms. He shook his head a great deal—which was depressing. He looked so grave that Lady Olivia burst into tears. He said his brother physician (with a glance full of overpowering condescension at little Dr. Bland, who refused to see it) had done everything that was necessary except for so and so, and so and so, and so and so. He took a pinch of snuff; implored the heart-broken mother, in a voice of the deepest solicitude and the purest bass, not to give way; pocketed his fee with a grace indescribable, and went back to town again, leaving them all terribly alarmed and dispirited, and expectant only of the worst.

The sun that shines upon the healthy and the sick alike has stolen stealthily into the chamber where Felix lies prone, wasted and weak.

It is the seventh day since the fever attacked him, and Lady Olivia (who has induced his sorrowing mother to lie down for an hour or so), attracted by some faint sound coming from the bed, hurries to his side and bends over him.

His eyes are wide open, and staring at her. It is growing towards evening, and through the sunbeams, which are late to-day, the twilight is creeping.

"What is it, dear?" she asks tenderly, more in gentleness than because she expects any lucid answer.

"Imogen," he whispers back in a voice low and faint as a June breeze.

"I am not Imogen, dear Felix," says Lady Olivia soothingly, thinking he still wanders. She lays her hand upon his brow. It has grown wonderfully cool.

"I know it. But I want her. Why does she never come?" whispers back the sick man fretfully. "Tell her, tell her!"

"Tell her what, dear boy?"

But he will say nothing but those two words, "Tell her," and those he repeats over and over again until poor Lady Olivia grows nearly distracted.

Did she follow the dictates of her own kind heart, she would have sent for Imogen upon the spot. But recent events deter her. That last scene upon the hunting-ground—Clanbrassil's sad withdrawal, and Imogen's own despair—all serve to hinder her from summoning her daughter to Felix's bedside.

"Imogen! Imogen!" he calls incessantly, with a frightful impatience. But then all suddenly the little ray of intelligence so hardly gained vanishes again, and he wanders off once more into the terrible fever-land, bearing there with him the name of her dearest to him on earth.

For two hours he lies thus calling wildly upon her, now feebly, now entreatingly, but always for her, until Lady Olivia's heart is smitten to its core.

She is alone with him. Mrs. Brown (the maid has just told her) has fallen into a refreshing sleep, worn out, no doubt, by fatigue and sorrow. The nurse has been sent for a short walk. Lady Olivia is positively coming fast to her wit's end when a familiar and most welcome footstep on the stairs, that comes ever nearer and nearer, lifts her heart high. It is little Dr. Bland, that kindest, most comfortable of all the *Æsculapian* tribe.

Felix's voice, heightened by fever and excitement, has reached him even upon the corridor outside. Entering the room somewhat hastily, though noiselessly as a cat, he forgets to acknowledge Lady Olivia's glad greeting, but, bending over his patient, examines him anxiously.

Felix, moved by the sound of his entrance, turns eagerly upon his pillow, and flings out his uninjured arm towards him.

"Imogen! Imogen!" he repeats again with wild impatience, staring at the doctor with great bright eyes glowing with fever. "Tell her——"

He pauses as if puzzled and distressed. Here his brain has deserted him. But his hot hand clutches old Bland's arm, and he looks at him with a hope, a longing that is pitiable in its intensity.

"Tut, tut, my lad, how is this?" says Dr. Bland, laying his own hand soothingly upon the clinging fingers that are burning so cruelly. "Why, of course we'll tell her—eh, eh?"

He presses the imploring hand again in quite an airy, confidential way, and then turns to Lady Olivia. His face, when hidden from Felix, is very grave.

"Lady Olivia," says he with decision, "Miss Heriot must be induced to come to him, or I will not answer for the consequences."

For this command Lady Olivia in her soul blesses him. Has he not lifted the responsibility from her shoulders, and compelled her to do what she has been secretly longing to do all this weary time?

"I'll manage it," she says, and despatches a message to Imogen forthwith.

And Imogen obeys the summons with scarcely a moment's delay. And even as her light foot crosses the threshold of the door, a strange calm falls on Felix. He turns his gaze upon her. For the time the fever sinks, conquered by almighty love. His beautiful eyes, lit up with passionate joy and sudden glad relief, fix themselves on hers as if for ever.

"The god of love! oh benefactor,
How mighty and how great a lord is he!"

Slowly and with hesitation Imogen advances to the side of the bed. She has not looked at her mother or the doctor on entering; she has, indeed, looked only at Felix. Now, as she reaches him, she finds herself alone. Dr. Bland has adroitly conveyed away Lady Olivia to the little ante-room beyond. Good old man!

"You—it is you? It is not the phantom that is always tormenting me?" says Felix in a low, fond tone.

"It is I—Imogen!" returns she.

And she falls upon her knees beside him, and takes his hand in both of hers, and bows her head until her cheek rests upon it. She is pale and trembling, and scarce permits herself to glance at him. The heavy tears are coursing each other down her wan cheeks in rapid succession.

As for Felix, as her hand met his, who shall describe the

transformation that took place in him? Not a sound escapes him; he lies tranquilly amongst his pillows, content with the joy of her presence! And now he tightens his fingers feebly upon hers. She responds to his pressure, and lifts her head. Their eyes meet. In his is a heavenly sweetness born of love satisfied; and in hers, what is there? At least a forgetfulness of all the world but him. In this supreme moment she gives herself to him; is oblivious of everything but that he lies here before her, sick, it may be unto death.

A faint, happy sigh breaks from him. He draws her nearer in his feeble way. Obedient to his unspoken desire, she creeps close to him—closer still, and, womanlike in her generosity, gives more than he has asked—she slips her other arm around his neck. Once again their eyes meet; once again she obeys him. She grows deadly pale, then flushes warmly, and then—lays her lips on his!

* * * *

When Lady Olivia and Dr. Bland return to the sick chamber they find their patient lying perfectly composed, his eyes fastened on the door. Imogen is gone. Startled by their coming, he sighs heavily, but contentedly, and comes back to the more real present.

He is quite sane now, and if a little enfeebled, is still decidedly on the mend.

“Dr. Bland,” he whispers softly, “do you know that I am better?”

“Time will tell,” responds the doctor. “It a good deal depends upon yourself, you know; and now, at least, you will, if you please, abandon your love dreams and go into a proper dream at once. Sleep—sleep is what you want. Lady Olivia, I trust to you to allow no more young ladies into this room to-night.

Felix at this laughs quite rationally, and, changing over to the other side, falls into a sound, refreshing slumber.

* * * *

That glorious lamp of heaven, the sun, is streaming merrily into the sick-room, rather too merrily to suit an

invalid, thinks Patricia. Rising, she draws the curtains slowly together, with a backward glance every now and then at the figure on the sofa to see how the change of light affects him.

It is quite three weeks later ; the year is growing older ; spring is fully born : on leaf and tree and flower its seal is set. Felix has grown with it into life and strength.

Not once again during his illness did Miss Heriot enter his chamber ; nor did he ask for her or allude to her in any way. Only his mother and Lady Olivia noticed how he brightened into an excessive interest whenever her name happened to be casually mentioned.

He had had several relapses, not severe, and very short-lived, but long enough to make all settled ideas of a period before appear to him, on his more sure recovery, as shadows born of that wearisome time, when dreams and realities were blended into one hopeless, inextricable mass. Yet some remembrance of that one solitary visit paid him by the woman he so loves clings to him. In secret he dwelt on it in his first convalescent moments, and it was not until he had so far travelled on the road to perfect recovery as to be lifted from his bed to a lounge that he dared try to solve by speech his longing doubts.

"Of course, if you insist upon lying awake all day and never closing your eyes even for one wink of sleep," says Patricia, in a severe tone, "you must only expect to be condemned to your bed for the next--nobody knows how long."

She has been reading aloud to him scraps of poetry, with a view to inducing slumber, and is at last driven to open rebuke by seeing the unblinking wide-awakeness of his eyes.

"I'm sure I'm going to be sleepy in a minute or so," declares Felix meekly, anxious to propitiate her ; "but just now--that is--I fancy if I might talk a little it would help me to it."

"Well, *talk*," says Patricia, in the tone of one who plainly doesn't believe a word of it.

"It is so hard to begin!" sighs Felix artfully ; then, as though the thought that has been tormenting him for two

whole days has only just now struck him, he goes on idly, "Is your sister away from home?"

"Imogen? No," returns Patricia indifferently, being in ignorance of that one meeting in his room, and of many other things.

"Ah!" He is silent for a little while, and then, "Why does she not come to see me?" he asks as calmly as he can.

"You see, she has many things to occupy her about the house, now mamma is so much your slave," returns Patricia, smiling; "that keeps her away, for one thing; and Dr. Bland says you are not to see too many people: not to be excited, in fact—that is two things. Imogen always asks for you, however, and is always more glad than I can say to know you are getting on so rapidly." Here Patricia laughs, as if amused. "Do you know," she says, "she grows a little tiresome about you: she asks questions relating to you over and over again, and never seems tired of listening. That isn't like Imogen, do you see. But Sandie and I say the extra housekeeping is preying on her intellect."

"If she made inquiries of *me*, she would not have so many questions to ask," says Felix slowly. "Everyone comes here; yet she alone keeps aloof. Surely—surely Clanbrassil could not object to her paying me such a small civility."

"Clanbrassil!" Patricia stares, as if amazed: and then, "Have you not heard then?—has no one told you? I fancied you must have known it before this: her engagement with him is at end. He went abroad, to China, I think, the very day after your accident occurred."

A little wind that has arisen knocks a rose-branch against a pane, and distracts Patricia's attention from Felix. She stretches out her arm through the half-opened window, and having pressed back the branch into a more proper holding, turns again to her patient. It strikes her, as she looks at him, that he is singularly white, even for him.

"Ah! you are feeling ill," she exclaims hurriedly, going to his side. "What is it?—what can I do for you?"

"Ill! no," replies he, in a low voice, but with a radiant

smile; "I never felt so well in all my life; believe that. What were we talking about? Your sister's——" He pauses abruptly, as if hardly knowing how to proceed, and his haggard face flushes crimson. "What caused it?" he asks with suppressed agitation; "it must have been very sudden. Almost directly after——"

"I have told you," says Patricia slowly. "She threw him over the very day of your accident."

Then as the words pass her lips she grows frightened, and wonders vaguely if Imogen will be angry with her for being thus eloquent about her affairs, or if——

"You are talking too much," she declares sternly. "You are looking horribly pale. Your mother will say it is all my fault when she comes in by-and-by. Now, not another word. Lie back quietly amongst your cushions, and forget, if you please, everthing but *me*."

This modest request is most ungallantly disregarded by her refractory charge.

"But——" he begins with base ingratitude.

"Regard me as deaf," says Patricia severely. "I hear, I see nothing! I only read."

She opens her book with an air of settled determination.

"Till death have broken
Sweet life's love token,
Till all be spoken
That shall be said;
What dost thou praying,
O soul, and playing
With song——"

"No," interrupts Felix with sudden force, laying his hand upon the open page; "I cannot listen to-day. Have I not told you that I want to talk?"

He looks at her, and a little, short laugh breaks from him.

"Are you saying to yourself now, 'What a savage he is?' Are you wondering whether I have sadly deteriorated during my illness, or whether I am now, for the first time, showing myself in my real colours? However it be, my gentle nurse, believe, at least, that I shall never forget your kindness."

"I think nothing," unflinchingly, "but that you are again fast working yourself into a second fever."

"There you are wrong. I have left all fevers behind me. You, *you* have effectually cured me! Yet you do not know it. Is not that odd, O most excellent physician?" He laughs very gaily this time. "The fact is, I like conversing with you better than listening to the most perfect poetry man can produce. Now, you cannot be angry with me for *that*, can you?"

"I can be angry with you for other things, however: for the determined way, for instance, in which you are trying to undo all the good that time and Dr. Bland have done you."

"Your anger is like yourself, then—it is sweet," smiles Felix; "it is full of tenderness for me. Dear Patricia, in five minutes more I will obey you, and will be silent as the grave I have escaped, and will try to sleep, if it be possible; but, in the meantime, I pray you to humour me. I feel as though I had left the world for years, and have only just come most unexpectedly back to it. It is a weird feeling—a sort of Rip-Van-Winkleish feeling! Bear with it."

"Go to sleep," says the younger Miss Heriot, unmoved.

"I will, when you have educated me to a certain pitch about all the things that have happened whilst I have been cast aside. Miss Yelverton was with me yesterday, and told me of Tom's promotion. She said nothing of her marriage, however."

"I think it is almost arranged to take place next month."

"Happy man," says Felix, alluding to Captain Heriot, "He is about to marry the woman of his heart."

"Happy woman, too," returns Patricia, sighing gently as she thinks of the distant Bohun. "She is going to marry the man of *hers*!"

"Happy pair, then, let us say," smiles Felix. The smile soon fades, however, and he grows restless.

"What is the matter with you *now*, Felix?" asks Patricia at last, when she has smoothed his pillows, and given him his wine, and poked the fire and done everything she can to make more sure of his comfort. All to no avail, however. He tosses and moans, and sighs, and goes on generally as if he was the most miserable being in creation. All her ministrations have not reduced him to a desired calm, for "Who *can* minister to a mind diseased?"

"Nothing—nothing at all, I assure you," protests he. And then, after a slight pause: "Patricia, when did I last see Imogen?" he asks in a low tone, and with eyes averted.

"I tell you, you must not blame her if she seems negligent," says Patricia, thinking he is still dwelling upon the fact of Imogen's persistent absence from his room. "She has a great deal to occupy her time. You are greedy! You would have us *all*! The last time you saw Imogen was when you woke from your fainting fit upon the battle-field. The roar of the cannon was still in your ear (at least you said so) when you came to yourself, and the enemy was comfortably grazing—that is encamping—at a considerable distance."

"I know all that. Your mother has told it to me over and over again. It was Imogen who came to my assistance. It was she who stayed with me all through. My head lay upon her knees when the others came up." He seems to dwell upon all these petty details with a mournful pleasure. "But—have I never seen her since?"

"Oh, no, not since!" says Patricia in all good faith.

"It was only a dream then," murmurs he, and turns his face to the wall, and feigns sleep, as those do who are miserable and can find no consolation in anything, and have nothing to dwell upon save the disappointment that arises from their own sad thoughts.

Dr. Bland coming in about half an hour later, Patricia rises from her seat, finger on lip, and makes him a warning gesture that tells of the patient's happy slumber.

She is electrified, however, when the patient starts suddenly into life, and fixes eyes wide awake upon the doctor.

"No, I am not asleep," he says rebelliously. "And, Dr. Bland, there is one thing I must say to you. I shall never get well up here, never! I want to go downstairs."

"Hoity, toity!" cries the doctor, staring at him through his spectacles. "What's up now? Eh? My word! I think you are progressing wonderfully when you can make such an attack as this upon an inoffensive old man like me!"

"But understand me, doctor——"

"I understand you well enough. If you go downstairs to-day, you will want to go to Timbuctoo or the North Pole the day after. Your spirit is stronger than your body—let me tell you that, young man!"

"My body is stronger than you think. Let it start from this to-morrow."

"For what port? For what distant clime?" asks the doctor, laughing,

"For the library. They can wheel the lounge up to the fire, and I promise you faithfully I will play no pranks with myself; but I am tired of these four walls; give me four more! Patricia, say a word for me!"

"I don't think it would do him any harm, really," says Patricia eagerly. "After all, dear, *dear* Dr. Bland, don't you think that as long as one is condemned to stay in a sickroom one is bound to *feel* sick? h'm?"

She has entwined her arm in the little doctor's, and is beaming upon him in a pretty, soft, cajoling fashion.

"Ah, ah! You think you can do what you like with me!" laughs Dr. Bland gaily. "But you shall see—you shall see! Now what is it that you want, my lad?"

He has grown wonderfully fond of his patient during all these weary weeks, and even without Patricia's blandishment would have found a difficulty in refusing him anything.

"Your permission to go downstairs; once I have that, I can defy my mother and Lady Olivia. Give it to me. Say I may go down to-morrow."

"Bless me! I wonder you don't say now, this minute!"

"Ah, no! you see how reasonable I am!" murmurs Felix modestly.

"Well, well! we will see about it," returns Dr. Bland.

This reply, as Felix knows, is equivalent to a promise. And, indeed, the next day sees him installed in state in the library, with the latest magazines and all spring's sweetest blossoms round him, and the entire family—save Imogen—at his beck and call.

CHAPTER XXX.

"Love's a god,
Strong, free, unbounded."

"Keen are the pangs
Of hapless love and passion unimproved."

HEAVEN is pouring its sunshine on the awakening earth; its beams lie everywhere; the birds are singing on every branch; the sky is suffused with blue; the winds are gently playing with the unclosing buds; on every side is an established harmony; young lambs are bleating—their dams run to their cry; the tiny rivulets, last month so poor, so shallow, now swollen and eager, overrun their banks as they rush headlong to the great mother ocean; a tender green has spread itself over the brown meadows; fern fronds begin to peep; the world is strange to them and they unfold themselves to learn more clearly what the rain means, and the sun.

Some clock in the distance has just struck three, the sound coming in a muffled fashion through closed doors and screened corridors, to the library, where Felix is lying on a couch near the window.

He is quite alone. His mother left him five minutes ago, being summoned by Patricia upon some slight errand.

"She, or I, or some one," said Patricia, glancing back at him from the doorway, "will be with you again before you have time to miss us."

Yet he is beginning to miss them sorely now. He is very weak still, and more dependent upon them than even they quite know; and the hours without them pass heavily.

He is growing languid, dispirited, when the opening of the door behind him, the sound of a light footfall, startles

him. He lifts himself laboriously upon his elbow and looks round.

A tall and beautiful figure is advancing slowly to the side of his couch. Her arms are full of flowers. It is Imogen!

Perhaps she had not expected to find him thus, altogether alone, because she hesitates, and then comes forward, a lovely blush upon her face. Her lips are red and parted, her eyes lowered.

"Have they all deserted you? Are you quite alone?" she asks, standing before him with heightened colour and confused eyes that perpetually seek the carpet.

The remembrance of that last scene in his bedroom is full upon her, and is embarrassing her sadly. He, too, is dwelling upon it, but is regarding it in an altogether different light: not as a reality, in fact, but merely as one might a happy dream.

"I am not alone *now*," he replies, smiling.

He holds out his hand. Weakness has bereft him of the strength to be cold to her.

"I am glad to see you," she says, still rather confusedly.

She is standing beside his couch, and is looking down at the flowers in her right hand; her other hand is held by him.

"If to see me causes you pleasure, you might have been glad many times before this," returns he, with smiling reproach. "Do you know, you are the only one of all the household who did not come near me during my illness."

Imogen's eyes seek his. There is a curious expression in hers—an expression of mixed fear and uncertainty. Is it possible he does not remember? Has he *indeed* forgotten all about it?

His face is supremely innocent; there is no suppressed meaning in his open gaze. She draws a long breath of extreme relief. The moment she has dreaded—the moment when she should again be face to face with him after that silent, passionate interchange of soul in his room—has come, has passed, and has left her as though it had never been. She is relieved—she breathes more freely; and yet in her heart she is sad. There is a strange disappointment mingled with her recovered dignity. She now knows that the link

she had dreamt of as existing between them was of too brittle a nature to last; the wandering fancies of a sick man broke it. Yes, he has forgotten!

"There were so many; I was hardly wanted," she says slowly. "From hour to hour I heard about you."

"And that sufficed? Ah! if *you* were ill——" he breaks off suddenly. "Sometimes," he goes on presently, "I used to think you would surely come, if only for a few minutes. Not that I altogether expected you; but still, I hoped. It is weary work, hoping." He smiles faintly. "After all, I was foolish; there was no reason why you, of all people, should trouble yourself about me."

"If I had thought you wished for me——"

"Imogen!"

He interrupts her impetuously, and there is some anger in his tone as he does so. He drops the cold little hand he has been holding, and looks away from her through the window. Imogen draws back from him, knowing she has vexed him by the open hypocrisy of her last remark. "*If* she had thought!" when in her inmost soul she knew how he had been waiting, longing, hoping, all in vain, for some sign from her.

"So you have broken off your engagement with Clanbrassil," he says presently, with a suddenness that is almost startling.

"Hardly that. He broke it off with me."

"*He!*" He regards her with open amazement. "Then it was *his* doing, not yours? How could that be?"

"Why should it not be? It was the simplest thing in the world. Do you, then, imagine it would be impossible for him to discover he no longer desired to marry me?"

"Quite impossible. Forgive me if I say I do not believe your rendering of the story."

"In disbelieving, you eat your own words of a former date," says she, with a smile that is mocking and rather bitter. "Have you forgotten them? You have a bad memory, it seems to me." Again she thinks of the strange way in which he has let that momentous visit of hers slip from his mind. "Yes, it is all over between him and me."

There is an accent of sadness in her tone that attracts him, and renders him unreasonably miserable. Is she grieved, then? Does she miss her lover? Would she recall him if she could? All at once he is unreasonably envious of this discarded suitor :

"Through the heart,
Should jealousy its venom once diffuse,
'Tis then delightful misery no more,
But agony unmixed, incessant gall.
Corroding every thought, and blasting all
Love's paradise."

"You regret it?" he says suspiciously. "You have been unhappy, I dare say, and miserable ever since his departure?"

"I have not been miserable or unhappy; but I certainly would not have been the one to bid him go."

"And the reason for his going?" asks he impatiently. Then he recollects himself, and colours hotly. "I beg your pardon," he exclaims in a shocked tone; "of course, I should not have asked that."

"Why not?" calmly. "I would answer you if—if there were not so many reasons to explain. One will do, however. Perhaps," with a curious little laugh, "you were right, after all, when you said you believed no *good* man would ever care to marry me. I was angry with you, I remember, when you said it, but I dare say, now, it was the truth."

"Will you never forget that I said that?" His voice is full of pain, and his eyes grow dark as he speaks. "You know I did not mean it. How could I, when I regard you, as so far above all other women? You understand how I think of you—how I love you—how I always shall love you until the day I die?"

This sudden burst of passion has not weakened him; on the contrary, it seems to have thrown into him a sudden vigour. It is quite a strong grasp that closes over the slender hand hanging listlessly by her side.

"Ah, do not speak like that!" entreats she tremulously, growing very white. "The past is not to be overcome."

She pauses—and the sound of footsteps approaching them from the hall outside causes them both to start simultaneously.

"Some one is coming," whispers Imogen hurriedly. "Before I leave you, tell me—are you getting really stronger, really better? I should like to hear that from yourself."

"Would you?" He looks pleased, radiant. "Do you honestly care to know? Am I indeed something to you? To live in your thoughts even for a short moment now and then, gives life to me, Yes; I am better now." The radiant light dies suddenly from his face; he grows pale and anxious. "But how will it be with me when you are gone, unless you leave hope behind you? Say you will come again to-morrow—say it! Think to yourself how lonely it is to lie here all day with only one's own sad thoughts for company. You will come?"

He presses her hand entreatingly, and, raising it with haste to his lips, kisses it.

"I will come," returns Imogen slowly.

She has barely time to withdraw her hand from his, when the door opens to admit Lady Olivia, Mrs. Brown, and old Bohun.

"Ah, Imogen, good child, you here!" says Mrs. Brown, in her gentle way, that is now full of relief. "I wish I had known; I fancied him all alone, but could not avoid the delay. The time," apologetically (she is a little afraid of Imogen), "has not seemed too long, has it?"

Miss Heriot flushes faintly, makes some pretty, graceful reply, and glides from the room. Lady Olivia glances furtively at Felix, who, however, appears unconscious of any undercurrent in the conversation. Old Bohun looks thoughtful.

"Well," says the latter, when he has shaken hands with Felix, "you grow a little beyond sympathy now, it seems to me. I congratulate you on your good looks. A very little more coddling will set you on your legs again."

"I could find them now if they would let me," answers Felix, laughing. He appears to be in very high spirits.

"Tut! you are young enough to wait," says Mr. Bohun. Then he turns to Lady Olivia. "I have just been with Sir Hugh; I have heard news. He tells me that, like a sensible mother, you are determined to marry off all your family at once."

Lady Olivia laughs gaily.

"I don't know about that. One at a time, if you please, will suit us very well. We do not want to be left altogether to ourselves in our old age. You and Hugh were talking about Tom and Sylvia, I suppose?"

"He tells me they have at last arrived at a proper understanding."

"They arrived at that long before Christmas. The question of late has been about the wedding-day: Sylvia has been a little bit refractory about the naming of it, but Tom at last has conquered. Sylvia has so far given in that she has consented to go to the altar with him on the thirteenth of next month, always provided the day is fine. Nothing, she declared to me emphatically, would induce her to be married in rain."

"We must send word to the Clerk of the Weather to be on his best behaviour all through the thirteenth," says old Bohun.

"Silly child," laughs Lady Olivia; "who would have thought a girl who rode so straight to hounds would have been so superstitious?"

"She is a dear girl," puts in Mrs. Brown gently; "and, do you know, little things like that affect even the strongest natures most unreasonably at times."

"Oh! I argued it out with her," says Lady Olivia good-humouredly; "but she overpowered me with a heap of old adages—

'Happy is the bride that the sun shines on.'

And,

'Happy is the corpse that the rain rains on.'

And so forth; and she wouldn't be married on a Friday for anything, she said; and insisted on selecting a Saturday, which we all know is the most inconvenient day in the week, because it happened to be the thirteenth—an uneven and therefore a lucky number."

Felix, who is evidently immensely better this afternoon, laughs heartily.

"I expect Tom has his work cut out for him," he says, "but isn't he a happy fellow? Except Patricia, who is there so nice as Miss Yelverton?"

"There is Imogen," says old Bohun slowly.

"Ah, yes; Miss Heriot, of course," acquiesces Felix; then he turns away his face.

"It is time for us to be thinking of wedding presents," goes on Mr. Bohun gaily, who has been watching Felix attentively, and seems rather pleased with what he sees. "I wonder what that superstitious Sylvia would like?"

"Isn't it hard to know?" murmurs Mrs. Brown plaintively. "To choose a wedding gift and make sure of its pleasing, would require a gigantic brain."

"Don't give her a travelling-cloak, a watch, an inkstand, or a prayer-book, and you are sure to be all right," says Felix, who has by this time recovered himself. "As for me, I shall give her a bracelet. The more bracelets a woman has, the happier she grows."

"Young man!" remarks Mr. Bohun, "this intimate knowledge of the other sex sits but badly on your adolescence. To be wise too soon is to be bored too early. Besides, you are wrong! Bracelets are as naught when necklets come in view. By-the-bye," says he suddenly, looking at Lady Olivia, "how is it with Patricia and that scapegrace nephew of mine?"

"Pouf! They are only babies—they can wait," says Lady Olivia. "And, indeed, I think it is dying out. Patricia never mentions him now; and as for your nephew, why, where is he? I do not know!"

"I think he is in the garden with Patricia," returns old Bohun quaintly.

A silence follows this unexpected announcement.

"Outside in the garden with Patricia?" exclaims Lady Olivia at last. "My dear Richard, how extraordinary that you did not mention it at first!"

"I expect I forgot it," says Mr. Bohun. "Well, he is all right, no doubt, so you needn't be uneasy about him. He is a good lad—a very good lad. If he were my own son, I could not be fonder of him; in fact, he is my own son," says the old man, with such meaning in his tone that Lady Olivia, somehow, all in a moment feels rather glad than otherwise that Phil Bohun and Patricia should be disport-

ing themselves amongst the budding plants. And, after all, who shall blame a mother if she feels at times a worldly pang where her children are concerned? Is she worldly for herself? Will she be the gainer by it if her child is enriched? Is it for herself that she works and strives? A mother's ambition is surely the purest of all!

"I thought he had forgotten," says Lady Olivia slowly.

"We Bohuns seldom do that, be it friend or foe," returns old Dick calmly. "You see, after all, Lady Olivia, the children are slipping from you one by one. We will leave you the younger boys for awhile, but the girls——"

"It is only Patricia, after all," says Lady Olivia.

"And what of Imogen?"

"Ah, leave me one daughter, I implore you!" murmurs Lady Olivia quickly. Her eyes are on Felix; so are Mr Bohun's.

Mrs. Brown, altogether unconscious, knits on contentedly. She has become great friends with the Heriots during her son's illness—a proof of which is the fact that they do not mind discussing their private affairs before her. As for old Dick, he has been what the younger Heriots call "a chum" for many a day. Now Mrs. Brown, looking up, remarks plaintively:

"There is, after all, no understanding girls nowadays. For example, why did Imogen object to Lord Clanbrassil? He was devoted to her—he would have been suitable to her in every way; yet she would not care for him."

"Think of it more deeply, and I believe you will see how thoroughly unsuited he was to her in every way," replies Mr. Bohun pleasantly.

"Did he indeed seem so to you?" exclaims Mrs. Brown in amazement. "How differently people judge!"

"Differently, indeed!" laughs old Bohun. "Well, I must be off. No, thank you, my dear Lady Olivia; it would be quite impossible to return to dinner. I have so many things to dispose of between this and eight. But tell Sir Hugh I'll look him up in the morning about those sheep, and—and other matters. My love to the girls, and—this to Imogen"—he smiles, and pats the back of Lady Olivia's plump hand, and casts a sly glance at Felix—"this from

me : that I know, and *she* knows, there is but one man in all the world who can make her happy."

Again he glances at Felix, who has paled beneath his words, but will not look at him or accept in any way the insinuation conveyed. Some one else, however, who up to this has been ignorant of the drama enacted at her feet, sees both the glance and Felix's pallor, and hears the significance of the tone. It is upon the mother—upon Mrs. Brown—that a light suddenly breaks.

As Lady Olivia follows Mr. Bohun from the room, she rises from her seat, and sinks upon her knees by Felix's side.

"I have been blind," she whispers tenderly. "Can you forgive me that? Your own mother, who loves you, did not see what all the world saw. But I was benumbed by my fear for you. Darling, I know it all now."

Felix lays his fingers suddenly upon her lips. It is an involuntary movement that means "silence." He draws her towards him and kisses her.

"Dear, sweet mother," he murmurs softly.

"You are telling me I must never speak of it?" asks she, with tears in her eyes.

"Never! never! I implore you!" murmurs Felix brokenly.

CHAPTER XXXI.

"Misfortune does not always wait on vice.
Nor is success the constant guest of virtue."

"With fiery eyes, and with contracted brows."

IN the garden, who shall say how lovely is the hour? The sky, as Victor Hugo would say, is "as pure as if the angels had washed it this morning." Yet it now verges upon evening. A spring evening! All the perfumes of the earth seem to be here in this secluded spot. In the growing gloom a thousand twitterings may be heard; and the tulips and hyacinths uplift their bells, and throw into the amorous air a million sweets.

The glad sun is growing languid; his court is diminishing; his satellites, the winds, are falling asleep. The birds are chaunting their last melody, and are ruffling their little wings within their nests.

Patricia, moving slowly through the scented walks, is startled by the sound of a light footfall behind her. She turns, and finds herself face to face with Phil Bohun! It is (as if sentiment has ordained it so) the very spot on which they had parted, now so many months ago.

He is standing about three yards from her, his eyes fastened on her face. Patricia, seeing him unexpectedly thus close to her, feels her heart leap in her side. She makes a little hurried movement towards him, and then stops short.

He has come back to her! It is really he—the one for whom she has been waiting, for whose return she has been longing, all these past weary weeks. And yet, now that he has come, an unaccountable shyness suddenly overpowers her. Is it *indeed* Phil? Surely he is changed in some way! This tall, calm, eager young man is not the Phil of her dreams!

She moves back a step or two, and gazes at him reproachfully. Why has he grown so large—so much broader, so much *older*? There is even an expression in his eyes unknown to her. And his clothes, too, are different. They are blue almost to blackness. This is a grievance that is absolutely silly, and yet smites upon her heart and repels her. When last she saw him, when she parted from him, he had been dressed in grey—in the very same suit, as it chanced, that he had worn when first they met in the library at The Grange; and somehow, in her incessant thoughts of him, her mind had ever pictured him to her as being clad in that twilight colour. Then he was in the light, as it were; now he is in the dark. She tells herself it is, therefore, hard to distinguish him.

In truth, his clothes of to-day are mournful in the extreme in comparison with those others. They have escaped being altogether black by a perfect marvel. He is in every way a surprise to her, and the difficulty of receiving him with a graciousness that she feels is due to him fills her with fear. A terrible doubt shoots through her. Was it the old grey tweed suit she fell in love with, and not the man inside it? It is a perplexing question. The absurdity of it would, perhaps, have struck her, had this fantastic fancy occurred to her at a less momentous moment. Now she is incapable of merriment, and only stands in sweet disorder, gazing blankly upon her visitor, forgetful of manners, courtesy—everything.

As for Bohun, first his face has changed from the intensity of delight to an odd sort of surprise, and from thence to a slow reproach. The glad agitation he had begun with, has ended with the beginning of a despair. Does she, then, no longer love him, that she thus coldly regards him?

"Well?" he says at last.

"Well?" repeats Patricia mechanically.

It is a somewhat impolite speech, considering he is a guest; but her mind is so entirely put to flight by this darkly-clothed young man—who *is*, and yet is *not*, her Phil—that she can think of nothing more original to say than the repetition of his decidedly meagre remark.

Bohun seems as undermined as she does.

"Here I am," he says stolidly.

It is such an altogether superfluous assertion, he being such a self-evident fact as he looms there so tall and undeniable upon the gravelled pathway, that at any other time Patricia would have laughed at it; but now she is confused by this new-old young man, and a little frightened, if the truth be confessed.

"Oh, yes! it is true; one can see that," she stammers nervously. And then, as if horrified by the seeming brusqueness of her words, she makes a little gesture full of a meditated hospitality, and holds out one hand to him, and says in an everyday reception tone, "How d'y'e do?"

One can see at once that she is bent on doing the correct thing.

To describe the change that passes over Bohun's countenance when this barren civility is offered him is beyond me. There is only one thing sure, and that is that he refuses to see the hand. He thrusts it aside, indeed, and turns away from her.

"Quite well, thank you," he replies, in a stifled tone that is composed of mingled scorn and grief.

He walks away from her, as if unconsciously, and then comes back again.

"Patricia!" he says suddenly, with all the calmness of despair, "what is it?"

"Nothing—nothing at all, I *assure* you!" declares she tearfully, with an extreme nervousness. How is she to say that his clothes, his appearance have disturbed her! "I'm ——" She lifts her head, and puts on a plainly hypocritical smile. "I'm *delighted* to see you," she protests in a tone composed of assumed courtesy and suppressed sobs.

"You are *not*!" exclaims he passionately, with more force than elegance. "Anyone with half an eye can see that you are distinctly *sorry*! Good heavens! what have I done to you? How have I behaved? What has happened that I should be treated like this?"

"What have I done, then?" demands she pathetically, throwing out her arms, "You blame me, yet what is it?"

"Was there cause for blame when last I saw you?" asks

he reproachfully. "Yet *now*!—What has happened to us in the meantime?" he cries vehemently. "What cruel fate has separated you from me? *Not* me from you, as you will see! The very first moment I can get leave, I rush down here with all my heart full of you; and as I find myself face to face with you, in spite of all your tender oaths uttered when last we met, I find I should have done better had I stayed away! Your last letter to me—that is even now only three days old—is kind as was your first, and yet——"

"And now that *I* find myself face to face with *you*," vehemently interrupts Patricia, who is evidently on the verge of tears; "what is that *I* find! That you are so altered I would not *know* you!"

She fires off this bombshell with an angry force suggestive of growing grief.

"It is impossible that so short a time could create such a change in anyone as you describe," says Bohun indignantly.

"I don't care what is or is not impossible," cries she; "I only know that you are not what you once were. You—you are ever so much *bigger* than you were on that last day. It is quite plain to me that you have not been fretting during your absence from me!"

"You know nothing?" begins he angrily.

"Except that you have certainly been enjoying yourself!" She throws up her head contemptuously, and glances at him from under her long lashes. Certainly he has grown much broader, and—er—well, yes, I dare say there are some absurd people who would say handsomer!

"Well!" retorts Bohun, driven to desperation by her tone, and the apparent cruelty of her glance, "what if I am bigger! Did you expect to see a skeleton? Do you suppose that *you* are looking particularly delicate? If so, you are immensely mistaken. I never," vehemently, "saw you looking better. I dare say, if the truth were known, you have been 'enjoying' yourself, as you call it, considerably more than I have!"

"I have not! I have been downright miserable—perfectly wretched!" protests Patricia angrily; "one worry

has followed upon another's heels so quickly that I have had scarcely time to breathe."

"Then want of breath agrees with you," declares he unfeelingly.

"You can be as rude as you like, of course," says the younger Miss Heriot with great dignity; "but facts cannot be destroyed by sneers, and I must insist upon your understanding how my time has been spent since last we met."

"Excuses are quite unnecessary, I assure you."

"*Excuses!*" She turns upon him a gaze that should have palsied him, and that certainly reduces him, in a sense, to order. "Oh!" she says, with a tremendous emphasis, and a pause that tells of the coming of some awful storm. It comes: "What an *odious* person you are!" she says, in a wonderfully low tone, considering the amount of condensed rage there is in it.

Crushed by this, he fails to make her a reply.

"Nevertheless, you shall listen while I tell you of the many things that have distressed me since your departure." goes on the victor superbly. "First, there was Imogen, who went about with a white face and inscrutable eyes, looking exactly as if she was going to be beheaded: she behaved, indeed, so oddly that one began at last to wonder what it was she was going to do next. All this was trying, I can tell you, and exercised one's brain a bit! Then came Lord Clanbrassil and *his* misfortunes: after accepting him and encouraging him, and, I must say, treating him barbarously, Imogen calmly casts him to the winds! That was very bad, was it not?"

"I don't know," says Bohun gloomily. "I am so confused I cannot give an opinion. Yet, it seems to me that there are people besides Imogen who can treat people barbarously!"

"Imogen was unkind to Clanbrassil *without reason*," says Patricia with slow severity. She lingers for a moment to witness the effect of this last speech, and having seen it, goes on rejoicing. "Clanbrassil's face, as he bid me good-bye, has haunted me ever since. It was terrible. It disheartened me for a week. There was not," with a straight

glance at him, "much 'enjoyment' to be gained from it! Well, he went."

"And a good thing too," declares Mr. Bohun wrathfully, "if you were going to dwell upon his looks all day long."

"I dwelt upon nothing but his misfortunes. I felt he was hardly treated." She moves back a little, and fixes, for a fleeting second, two lovely eyes upon the heart-broken young man. "I should be very glad, Mr. Bohun," she says meekly, "if you would try not to trample on my foot again."

Now, by the barest accident he has vaguely touched her shoe.

"I assure you——" he begins hotly.

"It doesn't matter. It is of no consequence at all," murmurs she in a resigned tone; "I only meant that I should be obliged if you would not do it *again*! That's all! Well, to go on: after Clanbrassil there came Felix's accident; that," pensively, "made me more unhappy than all that went before."

"Ah!" exclaims Bohun. He looks sharply at her. This man Felix was not, as Lord Clanbrassil was, an acknowledged suitor of her sister. Perhaps, perhaps——

"You mean that fellow Brown, eh?" he says; "I remember him, of course. He was a good deal here in my time: a well-looking man, eh?"

"You might say handsome," corrects Patricia dreamily. "Men are without perception, I believe, or else you might have seen that he has the most beautiful mouth and chin in the world."

"A large field. Lucky he, if he can compare favourably with Nature's best. Of course," cautiously, "I take your word for it; but I confess I had not seen him in that light. Well, and so he has found favour in your sight? There was some story about him, I remember. He smashed himself up on a hunting-field, eh? I think you mentioned something of the sort in one of your letters."

"Ah, it was terrible!" says Patricia softly.

Her softness maddens Bohun. Cruel to him, and warm to another?—it is unbearable. All his soul takes fire.

"The jealous is possessed of a fine mad devil," says

Lavater, and Mr. Bohun at this moment is certainly a "jealous." He positively glares at Patricia, but as Patricia's eyes are on the ground, his glaring goes for naught.

"We thought he would have died," she goes on pathetically, looking at a distant shrub that has since last night burst suddenly into bloom. "But he didn't. We brought him round in spite of that London man, and now at last he is 'progressing very favourably.' That is what Dr. Bland says. Mrs. Brown, mamma, and I have nursed him all through."

"You nursed him!"

"Yes," tenderly. "Indeed, I think I did the most of it, once convalescence set in. And you cannot imagine"—with a quick bright smile that is exasperating to the last degree to her companion—"what a charming invalid he makes. He should be ill every three months, at least, if only to make the world in love with him."

"If only for you to nurse him!"

"He is so patient, so gentle. No angry, no unjust words ever come out of *his* mouth." Heavy stress on the pronoun. "To attend him was a pleasure; to avoid growing fond of him an impossibility."

"I told you you had been enjoying yourself," says Bohun, who is now white with rage and anguish. "You compel me to envy Brown in spite of his smash!"

He laughs, the very ghost of a laugh that is replete with bitterness.

"He might well be envied; his temper is so perfect," returns Patricia calmly.

"Well, go on with your recital; it is full of interest," puts in Mr. Bohun, with a geniality that is transparently hypocritical. "And so you were the one who came forward to look after the interesting patient. How charming of you!"

"You must not give me so much credit," modestly, with down-bent lids. "Mamma helped me, and Mrs. Brown, his mother. But mamma certainly has frequently said that I did him more good than any of the others."

"One can quite understand that," returns Bohun with

a curious calmness. It is a calm, however, that heralds an outbreak "And of what, may I ask, does your nursing consist?"

"I read to him, sing to him, talk to him, see that he has his medicine and wine at proper intervals, and sit by him until he has fallen into a decided slumber. It is a more arduous task than it sounds, but it is a very grateful one. When a woman's life is empty, she should try to fill it in some useful way. I was glad when Felix fell into my hands."

"Happy Felix!"

"Unhappy Felix, it seems to me. Would you like to be condemned to lie motionless upon your bed or your couch for weeks together?"

"It was not for that I called him happy. But go on, go on; never mind my vapid remarks. Tell me the rest of your story. So you read to him?—what? Shelley?"

"Not always; Longfellow sometimes, and sometimes Swinburne," says Patricia, with such an utter innocence of any incongruity in the mingling of the pure and the reverse, that Mr. Bohun bursts into an unconquerable laugh. It is a laugh without mirth, however.

"You are very good to him," he remarks idly.

"Not so good as it may seem. I like reading, and he likes to hear me read. That is all. It makes the hours shorter for him, poor fellow, and that is a great comfort, isn't it?"

"Immense!" says Mr. Bohun. He is digging the point of his stick into the gravelled soil, and making little holes therein with a vigour that savours strongly of a suppressed viciousness that longs for freedom. "Both to him and you. I wonder how you can manage to deprive yourself of it for even so long a time as you have to-day wasted upon me!"

"I do not consider I have wasted it," says Patricia with lowered eyes. "But, indeed, I think I *am* a comfort to him, at all events. When I stay away from him for any considerable time, mamma tells me he always asks for me, and wishes for my return."

an abominable tone. "I hope"—politely—"I am not now keeping you from him?"

"Oh, no," with equal politeness; "pray do not think that. His mother is with him now. I shall probably not be expected by him for quite half an hour."

"Ah, I see," says Bohun. Something in his tone annoys her.

"What do you see?" she demands haughtily.

"How excellent a thing it is to have the loveliest mouth and chin in the world!"

He pauses when he has said this; but she is too astonished by his speech to make him any retort.

"Can I do anything for you in town?" he asks presently in a pleasant society tone. "I shall be going back there by the evening mail."

"So soon?" murmurs Patricia, with a slight indrawing of her breath. She has grown very pale. Now that she sees him ready to depart, she wakes to a swift knowledge of the desirability of his presence, and acknowledges generously that the dark clothes are, if possible, even a trifle more becoming than the grey. "You make a short visit," she says slowly.

"I find it already too long. The country, you see, is dull; it does not suit me," declares he indifferently; "one has no place in it; one finds one's self in the cold, somehow. Now, the town is different. *There*, there are always distractions." He shrugs his shoulders airily. "I should like to see Lady Olivia before going. Is she at home—visible?"

"She is with Felix," replies Patricia coldly.

She seems smitten into ice.

"Oh, *confound* Felix!" cries Mr. Bohun furiously. Involuntarily, his assumed cloak of indifference has fallen from him; he is again the enraged, the outraged lover. "What does he mean by coming here, and meanly breaking a rib or two, and pretending to be dying, all for the purpose of making love to you?"

"He has made no love to me! I do not understand!" cries Patricia, who is now absolutely pallid. "You forget yourself."

"I forget nothing!" exclaims he, with a passion that will no longer be subdued. "Do you think I am blind—deaf—insensate? You shall hear what it is I have to say, before I go, whether you like it or not! You have betrayed me, and I don't care what I say, or what becomes of me. I don't believe he is one bit ill; I believe he is as well as I am, but that he finds it a very good thing to lie there upon a lounge, and get you to pet him, and make a fuss over him! I wish," cries Mr. Bohun between his teeth, "that he could only stand up, and I'd thrash him within an inch of his life! And you—you—who swore to be true to me!"

He stops short, as if half choked.

"You insult me!" murmurs Patricia, in a low but terrible tone. She has grown quite calm, and is a singular contrast to the vehemently angry young man who is standing opposite to her, reviling his destiny, and storming wildly at her and the innocent Felix. She looks at him for quite a long time, and then, "I hope the evening train goes early!" she says with a withering meaning.

"I won't go by it!" declares he, with sudden and fell determination in his eye. "I'll stay here, and see it out to the bitter end with him and you. What! Do you imagine I am going to surrender you tamely without so much as a protest? I tell you I'll stay here on the spot, and make it as uncomfortable for you both as ever I can. Six months ago you told me you loved *me*. Now you say you love *him*!"

"I do not!" exclaims she.

But he will not listen, so borne away is he by the weight of his own imaginary wrongs.

"'Out of sight, out of mind,' is a motto that certainly belongs to you. You are cold, heartless. You have destroyed my life, and have not even the grace to be sorry for it. You are a cruel, a finished coquette!"

He ceases, more through want of breath than eloquence, and glares at her.

Patricia has moved back from him. She has listened as if spell-bound whilst he is pouring out upon her the vials of his wrath; but now, when his voice grows silent, when he

stands before her like a wrathful judge, with no longer a word upon his lips, she recovers herself, and does exactly what she ought to do. She takes, indeed, a complete revenge. She bursts into tears!

The sight of these mournful messengers sobers him in a moment.

"Oh, how *wicked* you are!" she sobs deplorably. "How hateful! What horrid thoughts your mind can hold! What an abominable mind to hold them! O, how mistaken I have been in you! And I, who so trusted in you—who so believed! Ah! why were you base enough to speak of love to me if you did not feel it?"

This is turning the tables upon him with a vengeance.

"Patricia! what is this?" cries he distractedly. "Don't you see? Can't you understand?"

"I can indeed—no one better!" sobs she, with a determination that does her credit. "I understand only too well what an escape I have had from one who does not love me. I shall never cease to be grateful that I found you out *in time*!"

"If you would but listen——"

"Every day, every hour since you left me, I have been longing for your return—for this moment, in fact; and now that it has arrived, what has it brought me? One who *hates* me!"

"Patricia!" interposes he, in an agony.

"Forget my name, I desire you; forget me altogether. Henceforth," sobs she, throwing out her hand with quite a dramatic force that reduces him to frenzy, "we are strangers!" (She has been taking a course of the good old English novelists of late.) "You call me fickle! You mention to me the word love! You reproach me about it! —*you*, who do not so much as know the meaning of it! Well," cries she, lifting to his two great angry, tearful eyes, "I have at least this one consolation left me: when to-morrow comes, you will be tormented by remorse when you recollect all the horrible things you have said to me to-day!"

"You blame me!" exclaims he desperately. "But why? Have I, then, had no occasion to doubt *you*?"

“None ! not one !” persists she passionately. And then, all at once : “Oh, Phil ! to think that *you* should be the one to break my heart !”

CHAPTER XXXII.

“ And, to be plain,
I think there is not half a kiss to choose
Who loves another best.”

THIS is insupportable. Mr. Bohun feels as if his last hour is come.

“ If I might only speak,” he says miserably.

“ Not a word,” commands Patricia.

“ If you would only not cry,” entreats he. “ Your tears make me wretched. Every sob seems to cut into my heart.”

This being exactly the state to which Patricia desires to bring him, like a true woman she redoubles her grief.

“ Have you not made me wretched ?” she sighs. “ Here have I been loving you, oh so truly and deeply—so—so *hard* all this time!—and then when you come what happens? You just speak of going away again by—the—next—train!”

“ If you want me to stay——”

“ How I used to love you, and now—how I detest you !”

“ Oh, darling ! no——”

“ Yes ; detest you. I feel as if I could kill you,” sobs she wildly.

“ My angel ! how happy you make me !” exclaims Mr. Bohun ecstatically.

And in truth she has shown a strange way of going about her murder. Phil has encircled her with his arms, and she is lying in them in an apparent content that savours strongly of rapture. Her head is on his breast ; her sobs have come to a sudden end. A little joyful sigh is the sole thing that breaks from her lips.

Bohun, lifting her head, kisses her softly.

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A little time in paradise (what a very little time it ever is, after all!), and then the lovers return to the calmer joys of every-day life. Bohun celebrates his awakening by propounding a rather startling suggestion.

"Why should we not be married at once?" he says energetically, quite as if the "church and steeple, parson and people," are waiting him round the corner. "We have delayed too long already," he goes on eagerly, holding her hand in both of his, "when absence from each other has resulted in such unhappiness as we have known to-day."

"It was terrible," agrees Patricia, drawing closer to him; "I could not go through it again and live."

"See here, darling, we must, of course, be sensible, in spite of all that," goes on Bohun with the air of a sage. "One understands that to be married one must not be penniless. I have," growing rather red, and gazing at her anxiously, "only five hundred a-year, besides my pay; and—and that seems to you, perhaps—eh?"

He hesitates.

"Plenty; ever so much more than I thought you had," declares Patricia gaily, who, to tell the truth, had not thought about it at all. "Why, you are quite rich, you extravagant boy. I was as angry as possible when you sent me that sweet ring, and afterwards my pearl brooch; but now I can see reason in it all. Well, what else, Sir Millionaire?"

"You don't think me too poor, then?" cries he delightedly. "Patricia, what a darling girl you are! Well, I may tell you that I know two or three fellows who are married with less money than I have, and they seem to get on all right."

"Yes," says Patricia, seeing he expects her to say something here, and having nothing else ready.

It answers admirably, and sends him off again on another long preamble that is made up of joys, and hopes, and coming blisses.

As for her, she is dumb, because she has begun to feel a

little frightened. To love him has been a simple matter : to marry him out of hand, in this precipitate fashion, quite another. Her love for him has only touched, so far, upon the thought of an *eventual* marriage, in which she has pictured herself, to herself, as looking remarkably pretty, decked out with the orthodox veil and orange blossoms, and standing in an entirely picturesque attitude opposite some possible altar in the far—the *very* far distance.

Now, to hear this problematical wedding spoken freely of, as though it were about to be consummated in five minutes or so, gives her a decided shock. To be married means to be no longer Patricia Heriot ; she will not even be Miss Heriot—she will be Mrs., *Mrs.* Bohun.

Ah ! how funny it does sound ! A little smile, unknown to her, widens her lips.

What a hurry he is in ! She tries to suppress the smile here, and to frown a little ; but the attempt ends in a disgraceful failure. Through all the sudden fear his proposition has occasioned her, there runs a thrill of joyful pride, born of the thought that he is in such hot haste. Presently she becomes conscious that he is speaking to her.

“ I have discovered that I can no longer be content without you,” he is saying, with a tender air ; “ I have tried it, you see, so I know. And you, Patricia,” regarding her somewhat anxiously, “ can you be happy, separated from me ? ”

“ Oh no ! ” says Patricia.

For a moment she lifts her eyes from the green-sward at her feet, and looks at him. Then she lowers her eyes again, and lets them return to their unseeing contemplation of the sprouting daisies.

To be married—*really* married, like mamma ! How strange ! how curious ! how amusing ! It all sounds just like some wonderful dream ; but she will not awake from this one. Five hundred a year, he had said, and something else besides. The something else had certainly been vague, but no doubt it will prove a good deal. Still, the *ménage* opening before her will scarcely be a luxurious one. Will there be a *cook*, she wonders excitedly, or will she—she herself—have to study very hard from this until then, and end by being that important functionary in person ?

What fun it would be! She has always longed to revel amongst the pots and pans in the kitchen below, but cook, cross old thing! would never permit it. Now she will be her own mistress, her own cook, her own everything. Delicious thought!

They will, of course, give little dinners—small, because they will be extremely poor, but select. Mamma says it is everything to be *select*! She will have to see to the eating part of the *menu*, and Phil will see to the wines, the champagne, the hock, the claret, etc.

It is rather a good thing, she tells herself, that instinctively she has studied and taken to heart a few of the very important points where dinners are concerned, especially now she is going to marry a poor man. Ha! no doubt he thinks her an ignorant, silly girl; but she will show him! He need not be afraid that she will ever disgrace him by an absurd want of knowledge about the most *necessary* things, at all events.

For example: asparagus in February is, she knows, perfectly correct, and strawberries should be eaten in April. When the usual months for these two adorable things come round, one should (to be in the fashion) be tired of them. Ah, yes! Phil will see what a clever wife she will be!

Meantime, Phil is talking again. He is so happy, and is propounding so many admirable ideas, all full of joy in his coming future, that he has failed to notice her abstraction. He is conversing with her in a tone that is half victorious, half nervous.

"You are sure you will not be afraid to venture?" he is asking her now with loving earnestness.

"Afraid! tut!" says the younger Miss Heriot, with a touch of scorn in her voice. "What should I be afraid of?"

In imagination she is still in her kitchen, rioting amongst her utensils, with that most incomparable of all cookery-books, "*Mrs. Beeton*," spread upon a snowy kitchen table before her. She is covered with a big white apron that reaches from her beautiful throat to her dainty toes, and is eminently becoming; and is altogether lost in a day-dream that delights her.

"Afraid, indeed!" she says contemptuously, throwing up her charming little chin with the air of one who defies fate.

"Well, there is the risk," remarks he, more bravely this time, being a good deal strengthened by her courage, which seems (as he sees it) to quail at nothing. Dear girl! she is ready, then, to brave everything for his sake!

"There isn't so much risk as you imagine," says Patricia, with quite a superior air. "A little belief in one's self, a careful study of others, is all that is really required. But of course there are so many authorities upon the subject, that at first it seems difficult to decide which to choose. However, *I* know. I have made up my mind. I know whom *I* shall consult."

"Ah!" says Bohun. He is terribly puzzled, and hardly knows what to say. At last a false light breaks in upon him. "Why, of course! You are alluding to your mother," he says.

"Mamma? No! She would be of no use at all; she knows very little about that sort of thing. Cook would be better than mamma; but she is so—so unsympathetic!"

"Cook!" repeats Mr. Bohun weakly.

Good gracious! Is she going to ask the cook about her future marriage? Is she going to consult that cruelly stout and rubicund, if clever, person, about her most sacred concerns? Is she, in other words, going mad?

"To tell you the truth," declares Patricia, in a little confidential tone, "I am not thinking of asking the advice of either mamma or cook; I am going to confide in *Mrs. Beeton*!"

Bohun grows even more bewildered. The plot thickens! Who is *Mrs. Beeton*? What is to be confided to her? Why should Patricia pass over Lady Olivia, who always has been kind, to give her confidences to a stranger?

"You know her, don't you?" says Patricia, tapping him thoughtfully upon the arm.

"No!" returns Bohun, with emphatic decision.

"Well, never mind; you soon will, I expect," says Patricia, with an airy, innocent laugh. "She will be the dearest friend we have after our marriage."

"Not mine, certainly," says Mr. Bohun stiffly.

"Oh, yes! yours specially!" with a gayer laugh. "Men are much more indebted to her than women are, and think a great deal more about her."

"I *never* think of her!" declares Mr. Bohun indignantly.

What! is he to have this unknown woman flung into his arms whether he will or no, and by his wife, too? The idea is not only unique, but monstrous!

"We shall see," says Patricia, with a sagacious nod.

"Patricia," begins Mr. Bohun solemnly, "hear me. You are an innocent girl, and wordly women of the kind you describe are not to be understood by such as you. I warn you, my darling, beforehand, that this Mrs. Beeton shall never enter our doors."

"Phil, how unkind!" exclaims she, shaking herself somewhat reproachfully free of him. "Would you forbid me my best friend—*our* best friend, I should say? Oh, it is cruel of you! I tell you that in time you will learn to love her."

"And would you wish that?" asks he with vehement displeasure.

"You can do as you like, Phil," says Miss Heriot tragically. "If you forbid me to have her, of course I must only submit. But if you do, I see nothing but discomfort before us. I don't see how I can get on without her."

"You will have me," suggests the embryo husband, with dignity mixed with sorrow.

"Much use you would be to me!"

"Patricia!"

Is the ground giving way beneath him? Has she really declared him to be of no consequence whatsoever in her eyes? Is the world coming to an end, and all because of this abominable Mrs. Beeton?

"Oh, there is nothing to be gained by your scowling upon me in that way! You are worse than the unkindest man I ever heard of! I tell you that without 'Mrs. Beeton' I shall be nowhere! You will be uncomfortable with me, and you will learn to hate me. Sandie once told

me the way to a man's heart, and how am I to keep your heart, if you eat nothing that is served for dinner?"

"Do you mean to say you want to hire her as our cook?"

"She is as good as any cook; in fact, she makes cooks."

"Is that her profession? Where on earth did you meet with her?"

"It was one day in Florence's. She is so clear, so concise, one can't mistake what she means."

"Poor child! You are too young to understand such people."

"I understand her perfectly!" exclaims Patricia indignantly. "And I warn you now, for the last time, that without her I shall be miserable, and you will learn to be discontented with me."

"My darling," says Mr. Bohun earnestly, "take this to heart once for all. I love you for yourself. I want you always to be just as you are. I do not wish you to model yourself upon anybody else. I will not have you study the arts of this woman."

"Very well. It is all over," returns Patricia, with a mournful resignation. "Your blood, er—that is, your dinners, I mean—be on your own head! Certainly"—dissolving into tears—"they won't be anywhere else, because you won't be able to taste them! Oh, Phil, to think you should be so hard-hearted; and when I had made up my mind to buy her!"

"To *buy* her!"

"Yes, of course. It is only six-and-sixpence, or seven shillings, or something like that; and she would be such a saving afterwards."

"To buy Mrs. Beeton for six and-six!"

"Nearly every woman I know has bought her. Be reasonable now, Phil, and let me buy her too."

"Who is she? what is she? Is she a ubiquitous creature? Is she the devil?" asks Mr. Bohun faintly.

"She is a book!" returns Patricia slowly. "Why, you didn't think—eh? what? Oh, how absurd?" She bursts into wild mirth, and falls into her lover's arms, who now, too, having grasped the situation, is so convulsed with laughter that he cannot speak.

"Well, of all the silly old geese I ever met!" begins Patricia presently, when sanity is in part restored to them; but he interrupts her.

"Recollect yourself, madam! You have given yourself to-day a lord and master. Respect him."

"A fig for him!" laughs she saucily. "I am your lady and mistress; now let us see who will win the day."

A voice reaches them from some distant avenue—"Patricia, Patricia!" The sound comes to them from between the laurel groves with a faint sweetness.

"It is Imogen. I must go," murmurs Patricia.

"One moment first. Your father! I must speak to him. You see, as my uncle's heir, I am somebody; but in the present, nobody."

"Hush!" says she, laying her fingers on his lips.

"It is true, though. Five hundred a year will sound like beggary to Sir Hugh. Still, I will speak. Shall I go to him now, or—?"

"No—no! not now. There is always to-morrow," whispers she nervously. "And besides—besides, I think if I were you I should say something first to mamma."

"As you wish," replies he.

She smiles upon him, returns the pressure of his hand, and moves away.

Already the twilight is covering all the land. The sun has fallen asleep, and a little tender night-wind sweeps up to them from the sea.

Looking back, she smiles again at him—a smile that means "My heart will stay behind."

Bohun hurries after her. He lays his hand upon her arm as if to make more sure of her, and gazes passionately into her dark lustrous eyes.

"Beloved, say to me again, once before you go, that it is true: that you do indeed love me!"

"Sceptic!"

She whispers the word, rather than says it. She is standing on the second step of the balcony, and is, therefore, about on a level with him as he looks up at her from the ground. She steals her arm round his neck, and lays her velvet cheek against his.

"You are happy!" murmurs he. "You have no fears, no regrets? Tell me that, too."

" 'My heart is light as a leaf o' a tree,' "

quotes she sweetly; and with a last embrace they part.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

“ Dreams in their development have breath,
And tears, and tortures, and the touch of joy ;
They leave a weight upon our waking thoughts ;
They make us what we were not—what they will,
And shake us with the vision that's gone by.”

TO-MORROW ! How Felix has dwelt upon that word ? how earnestly he has longed for its coming ! She herself had said she would be with him again to-morrow !

And now that wonderful thing has disappeared, has vanished, has burst into day. A glorious day, a sunny, rain-washed morn ; full of sweetness, brightness—full of flowers. All the clear, ambient air seems perfumed with them.

“ The budding flow’ret blushes at the light ;
The mees, besprinkled with the yellow hue ;
In daisied mantles is the mountain dight ;
The noshe young cowslip bendeth with the dew ;
The trees enleafed into heaven straight,
When gentle winds do blow, to whistling din is brought. ”

Felix, lying on his couch near the window, sees all this beauty of the outer world, yet loves it not. His mind is centred upon one sole thought : will she come ?

Her promise rests with him ; but should she be false to it ! He is stronger now, and able to walk a little, but not strong enough to bear with equanimity such a blow as her refusing to come to him would be, when his whole heart is bent upon seeing her. He had thought somehow, though no hour had been mentioned, that she would be with him early : yet mid-day has chimed long since, and her sweet presence is still denied him. He had crept down to the library quite twenty minutes before his usual time, that he might be the first at the rendezvous ; and yet—she is not here.

Patricia has been hovering round him off and on, but she

is a little pre-occupied to-day, a little distraight, and gay with a nervousness that suggests some hidden excitement; but Felix had not the courage to ask her any question about Imogen.

Just now she had been called away to see her father in the library, and had risen hurriedly from her low chair beside his couch, and with a blanched face had hastily quitted the room.

Felix, thus doubly bereft of his hope and his gentle companion, glances with gloomy brow upon the budding nature without. "Cuckoo! Cuckoo!" comes the soft sound of the little treacherous grey bird that haunts the spring. Soft breaths from the bursting hawthorn and the pink and yellow primroses steal through the window. Violets on the bank beneath are nodding their dainty heads. All round the busy fountain on the pleasure great tender fronds of waving ferns are nodding tremulously.

Beyond lies the wood, rich in its many greens; beyond that again a glimpse of the calm ocean; beyond that again the glowing sun. The whole earth to-day is passing sweet, but to Felix it is bare and cold. He acknowledges its perfections, but fails to let the grandeur of it inundate his soul. A grief surrounds him that dulls the pleasure nature might, in happier moments, afford.

"Yet to my will
Albeit all is fair, there lacketh something still."

"One! The cruelly faithful little clock upon the chimney-piece tells the hour calmly, without the smallest regard for the feelings of anyone. It has made no gentle delay; to the very instant it has struck, carrying another wound to the already sore heart of the invalid. He had been so absorbed in his own reflections, that for a while he had been mercifully oblivious to the passage of time, and now is roused to a mournful remembrance of it.

Another whole hour gone, and no sign given by her! She has no doubt repented of her promise hastily given, and will not trouble herself to waste a second visit on him. Why, he must be positively distasteful to her, to induce a gentle nature such as hers to show such cruelty! Well, it

is all over then, and he must learn to accept and bear the barren life that stretches inexorably before him.

A tiny bunch of violets, emitting a heaven-sent breath, falls upon his knees. He looks up, and there is Imogen.

She is smiling, radiant; there is a freshness about her that speaks of the open air. She has come to him from the garden, through the glass door in the ante-room.

"You see I have kept my promise," she says gaily.

In a moment Felix's pallor deserts him. Yesterday, when she came, a great wave as of returning strength rushed through all his veins; now again that strength declares itself. He sits up on his couch, and his eyes grow large and bright. Who shall say that her visits are not more to him than all the medicines and broths in the world?

"Such a promise means life," returns he.

His voice is faint, because of his glad emotion.

"This day should mean it," she says; "was there ever one more beautiful?" She throws wider the half-open casement, and seems to grow even more joyous in the glad sunshine that pours in, encircling her with its glory. "It is already summer," she goes on brightly; "a happy foretaste of it, at least. The winds are as soft as velvet, and the flowers are everywhere, instead of being sought for longingly one by one."

"Yes," returns Felix vaguely, who, in truth, is thinking less of the flowers than of the perfect picture she is making as she stands there framed in by the window and its wreaths of hanging ivy.

"I have a passion for flowers," goes on Miss Heriot, smiling; "my one passion. Did you like those I arranged for you before breakfast this morning? There they are, over there."

She points to a distant table.

"Were they for me? I did not know; I did not know either that it was you who had arranged them, though I suppose I should have felt that. But I did not dare flatter myself so far."

"Chiefly they were meant for you, at least," returns she slowly. There is a little faint change in her tone. "In-

valids, you know, are entitled to every choice thing that may be had. Though, indeed," with a swift glance at him, "you can hardly come under that head now."

He is flushed ; and looking remarkably well.

She closes the window, and moves again into the centre of the room. A brilliant fire is burning in the grate ; for though the days are full of sunlight, still winter can be remembered.

"Will you not come and sit here?" asks Felix, pointing to the chair close to his lounge that she had occupied yesterday.

"I think not. In spite of my enthusiasm about the day, I like the fire too."

She smiles, and rubs her pretty hands ; but anyone can see she hardly means what she says.

Felix, rising slowly, slowly walks to the hearthrug, and stands there, leaning his back against the mantelpiece.

"Do you know, I think I agree with you," he says quietly. This move on his part has brought him considerably nearer to her.

"You are foolish!" exclaims Imogen, colouring warmly. "You should not have stirred. You know Dr. Bland has still recommended to you a lying posture. Be reasonable ; go back to your couch."

"Pooh! Dr. Bland is an old tyrant, and—yes, I will confess it—the dearest old man in the world, too. Believe me, it does me good to stand now and then for a while."

"I think not: I am sure not. If——" she hesitates, and grows even more crimson, and bits her lips vexatiously, "if you will go back to the window, I will go and sit beside you."

"And so make yourself uncomfortable?" he laughs. "What a bribe to offer me! what you must think of me to offer it! No, as you prefer the fire, so do I."

He is looking extraordinarily tall on account of his gauntness, and remarkably handsome too.

"Come, let me have my way for once," he says, smiling ; "to stand is, believe me, a positive luxury."

"I have no right to control your actions," replies

Imogen with a little shrug. But her colour has faded, and she is now very pale. "Stand if you will."

"You give me permission?" asks he, laughing. "Well, then, I will!"

She smiles too.

"I thought you sensible," she murmurs reproachfully.

"You!" he regards her intently; "and I thought you the one person in the world who would certainly never say that to me."

There is a meaning in his tone, and she lowers her eyes. Presently she rises from her chair.

"Patricia can manage you better than I can. It is only just that it should be so, as she attended you through your illness. I can see I am of no use at all. I only do you harm. I shall call Patricia."

"No, do not," entreats he earnestly; "I will do anything—I will even return to that abominable couch from which I feel I have just escaped, if you will only stay with me. But be merciful as you are strong; say that if I sit in this charming arm-chair it will do for a while."

"Well, let me see you seated," replies she evasively.

"Imogen," says he presently, when the huge arm-chair has engulfed him.

He leans towards her, and there is a strange expression in his eyes. It is only the second time he has ever called her by her Christian name, but he seems ignorant of it. She, indeed, starts perceptibly; but he has been too accustomed to think of her by her more familiar appellation to notice her *bêtise*.

"Well?" she answers calmly, seeing he has paused.

"I hardly know how to begin, how to describe it," he goes on dreamily, staring more into the curious depths of the fire than at her; "but there is something connected with the earlier part of my illness—an illusion, it must have been born of my fever-haunted brain—that clings to me still obstinately, and will not permit me to forget it."

"Such vague imaginings are attendant upon fever," replies Miss Heriot carelessly; but as she speaks, she opens wide a huge crimson fan lying upon a table near her, and holds it so that her face is hidden from him.

"Are they? Yet mine was so clear; and whenever I see you it returns to me with a fourfold strength. It torments, yet delights me. I should like to tell you about it. I always have an odd fancy that if I did I should be emancipated from it for ever."

"But if it delights you, why be glad to lose it?"

"Because it also torments me. And the torture is greater than the joy. When you hear it, you will understand why, and the cause of——"

"It is foolish to dwell so on a mere fancy. I would not repeat it if I were you—it will only help you to remember it the more persistently."

"I think not. I think it will kill it. One word from you would dissolve it into thin air."

"From me?"

"Yes."

"Am *I* then connected with it?" The hand that holds the fan trembles slightly.

"You are, in effect, the whole of it. Let me tell it to you."

"It will only distress or upset you. Already you grow excited."

"Because you thwart me. You know how irritable even the best behaved invalids can be when crossed in any way. I do entreat you to let me have my way here. *May* I tell it to you?"

"Of course," she says, in a stifled tone, and very coldly.

"I wish you would put down that fan then, and be a little bit sympathetic with my folly." He speaks half playfully, half petulantly, as a man will do who has been ill and on the verge of the grave, and still is not well, and who has been nursed and petted for weeks by pretty women.

Imogen lays the friendly fan upon her knees obediently, and turns to his, with a curious courage, a face as white as marble.

"You are cold?" he exclaims suddenly, gazing at her.

"It is true. So I am," she returns, grasping at the chance offered. "I will kneel here before the fire, and warm my hands whilst you recount to me your vision."

She sinks upon her knees on the hearthrug, half turned from him, determined that if the worst comes to the worst, and if what she is about to hear should prove to be the thing she dreads, he shall not watch her face during the recital.

"It was like this," he begins slowly, leaning forward until his elbows rest upon his knees. "I thought that as I lay in bed one evening, the door opened and—and you came in. There was no one else in the room. We were alone. I fancied you crossed the room in that pretty slow way you have, and stood at last beside by bed, close to me, and looked down sorrowfully upon me. Your eyes—I can see them now!—were full of tears; large tears—I am not sure—but I think—I *think*——" He pauses as if recollection is difficult to him, and as though it gives him distress to bring back to his mind some forgotten thing. "I think," he goes on uncertainly, "that one rolled down your cheek."

"You are *mad* to so exert your brain!" cries Miss Heriot suddenly, in a rather vehement if low tone. "What is this thing, after all, but a dream—a fantasy——"

"I entreat you to hear me to the end," interrupts he gently. "Yes, that tear was there—it was shed for *me*! I held out my arms to you—forgive me! As you say, it was but a chimera of the brain. I whispered to you; and it seemed to me that you — *you* who in life showed me only coldness—were then kind! You did not turn away; you came nearer, nearer still! I can see your face again, I can feel your breath——" He has risen without knowing it, and his eyes are now fixed wildly upon the opposite wall, as though there he can see again re-enacted all that is struggling for light within his brain.

Imogen, too, has sprung to her feet. Her face is livid; her breath is coming from her in short painful gasps. She puts out her hand as though to stay him from further speech, but he does not see her. His voice once more breaks upon the stillness—lower, fainter.

"You sank upon your knees beside me. You laid your face close to mine—upon the pillow! I thought then I was in heaven! I whispered something to you—you *listened*!

I asked you to grant me something. You *consented*. I drew you towards me—and you——”

“No, *no*, no!” cries Imogen in an agonized tone. She throws out her arms in passionate protest, and as though unable longer to restrain herself, so great is her fear of what his next words may be.

“It was *true* then!” exclaims Felix excitedly; “it was no vision after all! I know it now. It was not imagination—how could I ever have believed it was?—it was reality! My beloved! my darling! It was *indeed* you!” He makes a step forward.

“I knew you were exerting yourself too much—your brain is already suffering,” says Miss Heriot, making a supreme effort at composure. She motions him back. She has mastered her agitation in part, but the strain has weakened her. She is trembling like an aspen leaf. “I do not think you yourself know to what you are so strangely alluding.”

This last remark is a fatal error—it brings him to the very point from which she is striving to keep him.

“Will you deny,” he asks vehemently, “that you came to me on that one blessed day—and knelt beside me—and *kissed me?*”

“I—I!” she falters. She has grown deadly pale. All at once she bursts into tears and covers her eyes with her hands. “It is not true!” she cries. “It was a fevered dream—*an* hallucination—*anything* but the truth!”

“You say that?” exclaims Felix. He falls back a step or two, and looks perplexed—disappointed—once more hopeless! “I must believe you, but the memory within me is still strong. Forgive me! I should not have told you of it, but it is an illusion that haunts me night and day. Have I sinned past pardon?”

She makes a negative movement of her head and turns aside. The movement is very bitter to her.

“There are excuses to be made for me,” goes on Felix mournfully. “You see, it is not good for me to be with you. I say things that would be better left unsaid. This room, too, is full of old and cruel memories. Here once I told you how I loved you. Here you refused to listen to

my pleading, compelling me to see how wild, how mad had been my hope that my affection could ever be returned by you. You remember all!"

"Yes! I remember!" Her voice is faint; her slender fingers are clasped together with a strength that renders pale their dainty tips.

"Over there," continues he, pointing to the couch on which he has lain since his returning strength permitted him to be carried downstairs, "we met again after long weeks of separation, and, on *your* part, as it seems, forgetfulness. Yet, when you came up to me with your hands full of flowers, I felt no resentment. I felt only what an undying thing is love! You see this room is fraught with pain for me, and still I am happy here. It speaks—it breathes of *you*! I like to sit here, and think, and picture to myself those old scenes again, whilst giving to them a kindlier ending!"

His voice has grown sad and disheartened. He has sunk back once more into his chair. Plainly, there is no longer room for even expectation in his heart! The end has come.

"You still, then, care to think of me?" says Imogen in a stifled tone that seems to him full of feeling, but only for his disappointment.

"Alas! when shall I cease to care?" murmurs he mournfully.



CHAPTER XXXIV

"Now, by my soul, and by these hoary hairs,
I'm so o'erwhelmed with pleasure, that I feel
A latter spring within my wither'd limbs
That shoots me out again."

"Though old, he still retained
His manly sense and energy of mind."

"WHAT, Felix, all alone?" exclaims Lady Olivia, entering the library about half-an-hour later. "This is too bad! Where are the girls? Where is everybody? You are being shamefully neglected, my dear boy."

She leans over him, and shakes up his cushions and pats them tenderly.

"Have I been long alone? It did not occur to me. I don't know how the time has gone," returns Felix absently.

"Your thoughts must have been happy ones, then," remarks Lady Olivia, smiling.

Felix lifts to her his large sad eyes.

"*Happy!*" he says.

There is a world of despair in his voice—despair that at last refuses to be hidden away or checked. His eyes still dwell upon her. There is an expression in them that shocks her. It is a revelation! Alas! what suffering has been his!

Words refuse to come to Lady Olivia's help; but at last Felix himself breaks the silence that has become almost oppressive.

"Do not fret about me," he says gently, laying his hand on hers.

This entreaty is but as a breath; in a moment his manner has changed, and he is looking up at her with a smile that, if weary, is at least more full of life.

"Do you know," he goes on, with an assumption of lightness, "that some faint rumours concerning one you love have been borne to me upon the air? May I mention them?"

"You speak of Patricia and Phil Bohun?" returns Lady Olivia, brightening a little. "Yes, it is all quite true, and such a romantic story! The silly children have made up their minds—or at least what they are pleased to *call* their minds—that life without each other is no longer worth living."

"You call them silly children! Has it never occurred to you that there is wisdom in babes?"

"Nothing occurred to me, I confess"—contritely—"save the meagre question of pounds, shillings, and pence. How are they to live?"

"'Bread and cheese, and kisses,'" quotes Felix, with a tired smile.

"Ah! they would get thin on that, believe me: at least, so Sir Hugh thinks. There was an immense amount of trouble with him at first."

She pauses here, and the smile fades from her lips as she glances down at Felix. Her lips take a remorseful curve.

"You are tired—you are pale," she murmurs, in a minute or so. "Forget what I have said: such idle chatter only serves to weary you."

She feels sick at heart as she contemplates him. With his own unfortunate love-affair so fresh within his mind, how cruel to torment him with an account of another so truly fortunate! She feels conscience-stricken, and makes a movement as if to withdraw from him.

"Your thoughts do me wrong," says Felix, in a low voice. "Do not leave me until I explain. You think," exclaims he, rising excitedly upon his elbow, "that such a story as you have to tell me will add increased bitterness to my lot? but, believe me, it is not so."

Here he grows calm again, and sinking back amongst his pillows, looks at her out of his clear, honest eyes.

"The happiness of Patricia is dear to me," he whispers, in an exhausted tone. "If the greatest good this world

can afford—the love of her one loves—is to be denied me, should I for that reason refuse my sympathy to others more fortunate?”

As he finishes, his face is quite beautiful in its pallor and its earnestness.

“Oh, that she *could* have loved you!” murmurs Lady Olivia, in a subdued but heartfelt voice.

“Never mind me!” interrupts he hastily. “Tell me of Patricia. Sir Hugh, of course, has given in? They have his consent to an immediate marriage?”

“Yes.”

She still regards him with a deep depression, and speaks as though no fuller explanation is possible to her.

“Ah! do not answer me like that, in monosyllables!” exclaims Felix, rousing himself purposely to a show of energy. “And do not stand whilst you talk; it gives me the lonely impression that you are going away in a minute or two. Take a chair! A chair is full of sociability, and will bring you at least close to my side. Take one!”

Here he laughs a little in his soft feeble way.

“See,” he says, “how my manners have deteriorated during my illness! I now order where I should serve!”

He smiles affectionately at Lady Olivia.

“Dear Felix!” murmurs she regretfully.

“Now tell me all about it,” demands he, checking her sympathy by a little sharp gesture. “All is well with her, I imagine, from your manner; but still I should like to know.”

“All is well with her, indeed,” says Lady Olivia, with a faint sigh. “At first, as I told you, Sir Hugh would not hear of anything of the kind. It was preposterous—absurd! They were both babies!” Warming to her account, Lady Olivia here forgets her regret for Felix, and grows openly amused. “He vowed he would never give his consent to so mad a scheme; he scolded, he raved! And still they held firm. They argued; he stormed: they pleaded; he turned a deaf ear: Patricia wept; but still he shook his head. All seemed at an end. I (believe me), though the marriage is, I know, distinctly undesirable at present, felt keenly for the poor things. At last the final

moment came. They looked at me appealingly, and I looked at Hugh. Still he was adamant!"

"Of course he was thinking of Patricia's future welfare; one cannot blame him," says Felix. This defence of her husband endears him doubly to Lady Olivia.

"It is true," she answers eagerly; "one should think. One should not be altogether carried away by one's feelings. Ruin would be the end of that. But Patricia was so pathetic. It broke my heart to look at her. The tears stood thick within her pretty eyes—and what pretty eyes they are, eh?"

"Lovely eyes," puts in Felix, speaking from his heart.

In truth, during all these painful weeks his little nurse has grown inexpressibly dear to him.

"Tut!" exclaims Lady Olivia gaily. "No doubt you think I rave, and that I am nothing better than a foolish old mother. But, nevertheless, I will still maintain"—with a sudden quaint obstinacy—"that the child's eyes are pretty! Well, well, that is neither here nor there. But about this affair. She and Phil persisted in their argument until at last a climax came. They asked Sir Hugh were they to live or die. I assure you, my dear Felix, it came to that. And it was too much even for Hugh. He gave in. He said a good many nasty things, but he gave in, and they went away rejoicing!"

"With his blessing?"

"Yes."

"'All's well that ends well,'" quotes Felix lightly.

"A good maxim—a capital maxim!" cries a fresh cheery voice on the corridor outside.

The door is open, and sounds enter easily. After the cheery voice comes the owner of it—old Dick Bohun.

Close after him follows Patricia with her lover, and then Sandie, and at the very last, as if reluctantly, there enters Imogen, pale and grave, with her eyes full of a strange shrinking. Her head is lowered, her whole bearing dejected, which gives her the impression of being compelled, against her will, to enter the room.

"So!" says old Bohun, when he has saluted Lady Olivia and Felix. "Strange tidings have come to me of two cul-

prits ; but I've caught one—eh ?” He seizes hold of Phil as he speaks. “And I've brought them to the bar of justice—eh ? eh ?”

“Oh no !” cries Patricia merrily ; “we've been there already, and we have discovered that papa is the most terrible judge in all the world ! We could see by his eye that he would have dearly liked to give us six months each with hard labour, but fortunately the gentle law forbade.”

“The law be praised for all its mercies !” says Sandie piously.

“Well, well ; but where do I come in ? Where am I to be considered ?” asks Mr. Bohun, looking at his nephew. “Is my consent of no consequence at all ? Have I no voice in this matter ?”

“Not one,” declares Patricia saucily. “You have been bought over long ago.” She lays her pretty white hands on his shoulders and gives him a gentle shake. “I'm not a bit afraid of you,” she says. “Don't imagine it. Papa was terrible, but you are *autre chose* altogether. I defy you. See ?”

She ends by giving each of his cheeks a little tender pat ; and then with a final shake of his shoulders releases him.

“Ah, ah !” says old Bohun, who seems to like this treatment mightily. “Pity the sorrows of a poor old man ! Do not reduce me to powder. And so I'm nowhere, eh ?”

“Yes, somewhere,” whispers she sweetly, so that only he can hear. “You are hidden away safely in my heart. Do you think I forget ? Have you not alway been my friend ? First, when I was troubled about that luckless Sandie, and afterwards about——”

“That lucky Phil !”

The old man interrupts her with a lively chuckle at his own wit. He clasps one of her slender loving hands reassuringly.

“I have been a long time paying that debt of Sandie's,” she says regretfully.

“You shall be longer.”

“That is true. It will be quite *years* before I shall inherit what is due to you”

"After all, I won't wait," says old Dick. "I insist upon being paid at once, and in my own way, too. But we shall see; we shall see."

He laughs at her and pinches her fresh cheek, and then suddenly grows preternaturally grave again.

"Come, now," he begins thoughtfully. "Let us be sensible. It appears that you and Phil have agreed to get married; but how are you going to manage it, you two babes in the wood?"

"The parson will tell us that," says Phil, who has drawn near.

"Eh? very good! But will he tell you, too, how to live? Phil, here, has a pittance, as we all know. Enough for one, you see; but quite too little for two. And you," glancing at Patricia—"What is *your* fortune, my pretty maid?"

"Alas, sir, that I cannot answer you in the time-honoured words of her whose vanity must at least have equalled her charms!" murmurs Patricia, standing in an attitude of mock modesty before him, with head affectedly lowered, and one little finger between her pearly teeth. "*My* fortune is not anywhere at all, because my face——"

"Yes, just so. In fact, it is *decidedly* so-so," puts in Sandie agreeably.

"It is *not*!" exclaims Phil Bohun, with angry vehemence, and then stops short in some confusion; whereupon they all laugh.

"And are you content, my dear?" asks old Dick gently, laying his hand impressively upon Patricia's arm, and gazing at her with keenly earnest eyes, "to take my nephew for better, for worse, to live with him a life from which all the luxuries to which you have been accustomed from your birth must necessarily be excluded?" He pauses, and regards her fixedly.

"I shall have Phil," returns she slowly.

"A *rare* luxury!" murmurs Sandie mildly in the background.

"There will be privations of which you now do not dream," goes on Mr. Bohun solemnly. "Even though I am an old man and Phil will inherit after me, still there

are many years of life left in me still, so far as we dare judge, during which you must wait. And the years of the young are long! Reflect on all this. There will be little crosses, little vexations that will wear your spirit."

"There will, too, be Phil!" answers she, smiling very sweetly.

"Nay, *think*, my love," entreats the old man slowly. "Think, whilst yet there is time. *Now* is the opportunity given you for thought. Later on, when you have bound yourself to your husband by every tie, it will be too late for reflection or regret!"

"There will be no regret," says the girl, her voice vibrating with a glad, if tearful certainty.

She has grown rather pale, and at this moment her eyes seek her lover's. He, too, is pale, and is biting his moustache nervously. This ordeal through which his darling is passing is hateful to him. Will it weaken her love, or——?

"Do not seek to discourage her, uncle," he exclaims at last.

"No one could do that," returns Patricia calmly. She smiles with ineffable sweetness, and holds out her hand to Phil. Standing thus between the two men, with one hand clasped in her lover's, and the other held fast by Mr. Bohun, she looks as though she were the link that is connecting and holding together all three.

The old man takes no notice of his nephew's protest. He seems to have forgotten all but Patricia. His eyes are fixed upon the girl's sweet earnest face.

"Poverty to one unaccustomed to it is a sore trial," he goes on in a low tone. They are standing somewhat apart from the rest, and are virtually alone. "It hardens the heart. It crushes youth. It kills affection. Beware! dear child! Weigh this matter carefully, bearing in mind that if you persist in it there is sure trouble before you!"

"There will always be Phil," persists she steadfastly. And then suddenly her lips quiver and two large tears roll down her cheeks. "I have weighed everything—I will risk everything," she says in a tremulous tone, her shining eyes fixed on the man she loves. With what an expression

does he return her glance! There is love unutterable and a great triumph in it!

"Enough—enough!" cries old Bohun fervently, drawing her into his arms, and pressing a kiss upon her forehead. "You are indeed a precious jewel—a thing worth winning! Phil, you rascal!" addressing his nephew excitedly (who is closely watching every movement of Patricia's, as though expecting every moment to be obliged to fly to her assistance), "If you don't take care of this child; if you don't guard her as the apple of your eye—I—I—I'll come to the rescue myself, sir, and be the *death* of you!"

At this, Patricia lifts her head and laughs aloud. The colour comes back to her cheeks, and she furtively wipes away from her cheeks the last tears she is likely to shed for many a day.

"And now, my bonny bird," continues the old gentleman, who has by this time worked himself into a regular pitch of excitement; "I will tell you what I will do for you! Hold up your head now, and look at me!" He puts her back a little from him, and regards her proudly. He has raised his voice, and the others in the room, being attracted by it, are listening curiously.

"Poverty—tut!" says he. "A fig for poverty! Is *this* a face for poverty?" His tone has grown positively contemptuous, and it is plain that he is feeling highly indignant with this same insolent poverty, which has dared to obtrude itself upon such company. "Is The Grange so small that it can't hold the *three* of us?" cries he. "Privations, crosses, vexations" (he quotes his own words), "I tell you they shan't come nigh you! Phil, you villain! how *dare* you think of taking this pretty creature to share the lot you now have? I tell you, you shall have half my money, and half The Grange, and half *everything*, by Jove!"

"Oh, Richard—my dear Richard! what are you saying?" exclaims Lady Olivia, a little frightened.

"The truth, madam! The truth, my dear Olivia; What! would you have them wait for the death of a useless old man? I tell you, they shall be happy at *once*. Youth is the hour for enjoyment; and as for

me, if they will only consent to come to me, I shall count myself the **most** fortunate old fellow alive. And I shan't be in their way, mind you! They shall be as free as air. Their rooms *here*, my rooms *there*; and sometimes, when they are in the humour, they will invite the old uncle to dinner! Eh—eh?"

He seems beside himself with delight at the prospect, and kisses not only Patricia again but Lady Olivia as well.

"Phil, I wait your consent," says he, holding out his hand to his nephew.

"Ah! not my consent, sir—my deepest gratitude!" exclaims the young man, with extreme feeling.

Tears stand in his eyes. Can it be true that all his difficulties are thus brought to an end for ever? Will Patricia indeed never know what it is to be poor? It had preyed upon him dreadfully, the knowledge that marriage with him would necessarily teach her the smaller worries of life; but now she will be safe—protected from all assaults of fortune. His words are poor, but his tone and look declare openly the depth and warmth of his gratitude.

Old Dick, regarding him, is repaid doubly for all he has promised to do.

"There is one thing more," he says, addressing Phil more exclusively. "Lest you should feel dependent upon me in any way, I shall give my little niece"—smiling at Patricia, who is very white and silent—"a certain cheque upon her wedding-morn."

"You are too generous, Richard," puts in Lady Olivia, in a low tone. "How shall I thank you for all this goodness to my child? To you she will owe much of the happiness of her life."

"A sweet thought," says Felix, speaking suddenly. "I congratulate you, Mr. Bohun, in that to you it is given to do this thing: you are gaining a very perfect niece."

"Ah! *you* see it!" exclaims old Dick joyously. "It is all self, you know; self—self! I have the best of the bargain after all, I'm thinking. Ha! ha! ha!"

His jolly old laugh rings through the room.

"And Patricia a perfect uncle," says Lady Olivia, smiling.

Patricia, who is still very white, has followed Mr Bohun across the room, and has slipped her fingers into his. She has not thanked him in words, but this mute expression of her thoughts is well understood by him. He holds the little clinging fingers in a warm clasp, but otherwise very prudently takes no notice of her. In truth, he can see that she is on the point of tears.

After a while she recovers herself, and, obeying a gesture of Felix's, hastens to his lounge.

"I want to tell you how glad I am that now there is nothing before you but plain sailing," he whispers fondly. "Dear nurse of mine! it rejoices me to know that you at least will be spared sorrow—that only happiness lies before you."

"And you, dear Felix: there is happiness before you, too," murmurs the little bride-elect, looking down at him with beaming eyes.

"Of course, of course," returns he gaily. "Now, go away and talk it over with—your husband."

He laughs at the pretty blush that follows on his words; but as she moves away he turns his face aside, and a look of poignant anguish darkens it.

A touch upon his arm recalls him to the present once more.

"Are you in pain?" asks Imogen.

Her eyes, large and mournful, meet his. Her voice is cold and unwilling. Plainly some inward force has compelled her against her inclination to approach him.

"Yes," returns he simply.

"Can I do anything for you? Can I help you in any way?"

"No one can help me; *you* least of all. Do not torment yourself with me," says Felix gently, but with some bitterness.

A little faint colour creeps into her face. She looks at him again—strangely, as it seems to him—and without a word turns away.

CHAPTER XXXV.

"Some kind spirit knocks softly at my soul
To tell me Fate's at hand."

A RAIN-WASLED morn has brought a languorous noon. The flowers, heavy still with the sweet wet of the early day, are hanging their dainty heads in a prettily affected fashion. Great bunches of yellow daffodils make sweet the air. "The milk-white blossoms of the thorn" are shedding their petals on the mossy sward, and from the fragrant banks the purple violets breathe sweetest perfume.

The sun, high in the heavens, is already growing sleepy. Pale golden discs of light are lying slumberously on tree and flower and lawn. A soft but riotous wind has arisen, and is flying gaily through the young fresh leaves of the trees and across the fields, now decked with spring's best treasures—"cowslips delicately pale"—and those other wildings of the earth that all men love: those

"Flow'rs white and red—
Such that men callen daisies in our town—
To them have I so great affection,
As I said erst, when comen is the May,
That in my bed there daweth me no day,
That I n'am up, and walking in the mead
To see this flow'r against the sunne spread,
When it upriseth early by the morrow:
That blissful sight softeneth all my sorrow,
So glad am I when that I have presence
Of it, to doen it all reverence."

A gentle stream, now mildly ruffled by the sudden breeze, is singing its own pæan as it rushes over its pebbles and past its tall sedge flowers. "With one long sigh for summers pass'd away," with a sobbing full of joy for the summers yet to come, it hastens on its way to gain the giant river far below, that has for *its* destination the still mightier ocean.

In a little sunny nook of the sheltered garden in a low lounging chair sits Felix. Beside him Imogen. It is her turn to entertain him this glorious afternoon ; but, indeed, it is he who is entertaining her. Her knitting, that prettiest occupation for pretty hands, is between her fingers ; her *heart* is listening to him, as he reads aloud to her from a small volume of Spenser—that most sweet poet.

“I weary you, perhaps?” he says presently, laying the book upon his knee.

“So far from that, let me tell you how you delight me,” she answers, in the usual icily gracious manner she reserves for him alone. “You make me forget everything, even how time passes.”

He laughs a little, bitterly but involuntarily.

“That is well,” he replies ; “I would not have the hour, that an odd and most mistaken sense of duty, or else good-nature, induces you to give me every day, seem too long. Well, to our book again then. There is a double merit in it now.”

“You are mistaken,” returns she calmly. “But the matter is not worth discussion. Read to me again, by all means ; your senseless injustice wearies me.”

“Was I unjust?”

“I have said so. Read !”

Her tone is faintly imperious : it is evident to him that his words have angered her. He opens the book once again at haphazard, and lighting on one of the sonnets, reads it aloud :

“Sweet is the rose, but grows upon a brere ;
 Sweet is the juniper, but sharp his bough ;
 Sweet is the eglantine, but pricketh near ;
 Sweet is the fir bloom, but his branches rough ;
 So every sweet with sour is temper'd still,
That maketh it be coveted the more :
 For easy things, that may be got at will,
 Most sorts of men do set but litt'e store.”

“How quaint those old sonnets are,” says Imogen, as he pauses.

There is an established coldness, but perhaps a little less constraint between them, of late.

“Quaint, and wonderfully true.”

"As true of women as of men."

"True to human nature generally. This one I have just read is especially so."

"The idea makes one a little uncomfortable," says Imogen, raising her eyes from her needles, which are flashing in the rays of the sun. "It somehow bears in upon one the impression that the coveted object, once gained, loses its value. So much of its charm lay in its being beyond reach; the great longing for it satisfied, what becomes of the desire? It dies."

"Not always. Sometimes there springs from it a blessed sense of rest—a remaining joy."

"Too seldom! The struggle wastes one's strength. That is why the strongest feelings often fade the soonest. The battle gained, the conqueror sits down to pause, and wonder if the victory is worth the cost. He is spent then, and to his satiated eyes the loss is greater than the gain. Few of our intenser feelings are lasting."

"And yet a few are," says Felix in a low tone. "Hatred, for example, and jealousy, and—love!"

His voice has fallen very low. Once more he turns his eyes upon the book lying open on his knee.

"The rolling wheel, that runneth often round,
The hardest steel in tract of time doth tear;
The drizzling drops, that often do rebound,
The firmest flint doth in continuance wear.
Yet cannot I, with many a dropping tear
And long entreaty, soften her hard heart,
That she will once vouchsafe my plaint to hear,
Or look with pity on my painful smart.
But, when I plead, she bids me play my part;
And when I weep, she says tears are but water;
And when I sigh, she says I know thou art;
And when I wail, she turns herself to laughter:
So do I weep, and wail, and plead in vain,
While she as steel and flint doth still remain."

His voice dies away. Carelessly, yet with care, he has read the lines, pretending to mean naught, but meaning all that his impassioned heart dare not utter. A little faint colour has crept into her cheeks.

"What pretty nonsense it is!" she says indifferently. With a light gesture he flings the book upon the sward.

"Twaddle would better describe it," he returns, with a curious laugh. "We have surely had enough of it for one day."

A man who so lost himself in his love was a madman ! Let us talk of something else."

"Of anything you will," answers she. Again her tone has taken that indescribable hauteur. Has he again offended ?

"By-the-bye," he says, bending towards her, "I do not believe I have ever yet thanked you for coming to my assistance on that last hunting-day. How long ago it now seems ! I have no recollection of what occurred, but I have at least learned that but for you——"

"It was nothing. The veriest stranger would have done the same." She interrupts him with something that resembles vehemence.

"You saved my life," persists he gravely.

"I assure you I did no more for you than the passing herd would have done, had he been there. I beg you will not think it necessary to feel grateful to me."

"I shall certainly feel gratitude as long as I live," says the young man coldly. "That you would have done for the herd of whom you speak, what you did for me, I know well. Pray do not imagine I misjudge you in any way. I have had many opportunities of testing your humanity, your kindness of soul."

This sneer she lets go by her : but a little nervous pallor, touching her lips, makes them deadly white. Still she knits on, apparently unmoved, unhurt.

A silence falls between them. It threatens to be a lasting one, but an early butterfly, clad in a gorgeous livery of white and blue and silver, floating idly by, touches her hand. She starts. This unexpected movement in her rouses Felix from the painful day-dream to which he is fast succumbing, and compels him to enter again upon the more active rounds of life.

As though a sudden thought strikes him, he turns to her.

"Why did you dismiss Clanbrassil ?" he asks eagerly.

"You have asked me that question before."

"I know it. And how rude a question it is ! And still I ask it again. Will you answer it ?"

For quite a minute she hesitates, and then——

"He discovered, or—or *fancied*, I did not care sufficiently for him. And he was too honourable a man to marry even the woman he loved, unless he was certain of her affection for him."

Each word of this speech is a betrayal of *her* feelings towards Clanbrassil.

"When did he make the discovery you mention?"

"Our engagement came to an end the evening of your accident," says Miss Heriot reluctantly and coldly. Her eyes are bent downwards on her knitting, but the hands that hold the knitting are trembling.

"A curious coincidence!" He is watching her closely. "It would almost—but for the absurdity of the thing—lead one to imagine that my mishap had something to do with it."

To this she makes no reply. But her fingers move slower and slower, and her face has lost all vestige of colour.

"Had it?" continues Felix remorselessly.

"Something—perhaps. There—there was——"

"Then *I* had something to do with it," persists he. There is a cruelty in his questioning that is condoned by the anguish of his glance.

"You! Yes!" exclaims she with sudden passion. "I was going to say that there was a misunderstanding caused by you. He thought—they *all* thought——"

Her voice dies from her, and she rises to her feet. There is a terrible expression in her usually calm eyes.

"Why do you probe me? What is it you would know?" cries she with all the sharpness of despair.

"The truth," returns he. His agitation exceeds even her own. "Do you *know* what your words imply? If I dared to believe the meaning they convey, I might again be led to cry aloud to you for a mercy you will never grant! My heart's wildest prayers you have rejected. Yet once again—here—I confess to you that my very soul is yours; that no thought or desire of mine is born without having reference to you. I do not sue to you," he ends miserably, yet bravely, "I only tell you how it is with me."

The knitting has fallen to the ground, her hands are lying idly on her knees. She has turned her face aside.

"Listen," begins he again.

She shrinks from him now, and covers her face out of sight.

"Alas! it seems my lot to distress you," murmurs he mournfully. "Even now, when I mean to give you comfort—a comfort that will be bought by my own undoing! Darling, hear me. It is the last time in all my life that I shall speak with you. Have a little pity. Grant me forgiveness. At least *look* at me!"

He waits piteously for a glance from her, but she keeps her face hidden. In an uncontrollable agitation he paces to and fro.

"It is just—it is right," he says at last, as if bent on justifying his idol to himself, even at this last supreme moment. "My devotion has been a persecution! my love unmanly! I myself have taught you to hate me. But the future will rid you of me. See, I am going. Imogen! *Imogen!* Will you not even bid me farewell?"

Miss Heriot, starting to her feet, stands back from him, grasping the iron arm of her garden-chair. Her action seems to him to be still full of the settled dislike that he believes she bears to him.

He knows he would have liked to kiss her hand before going, but such a poor sad joy her manner forbids. He bows profoundly to her, and then slowly, almost feebly turning aside, goes from her, up the gravelled path.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

"The soul of woman lives in love."

"Almighty love! what wonders are not thine!
Soon as thy influence breathes upon the soul.
By thee, the haughty bend the suppliant knee."

SHE can hear the gravel crunching beneath his feet—each step seems to take him farther from her into the terrible future that will hide him from her for ever—in which she will have no part!

She lifts her head, and gazes wildly after him. Her eyes, large and bright with fear, grow painful in their intensity. Her breath comes in soft gasps from her white throat. Her frame trembles. An intense longing to cry aloud to him—to express all that has so long lain dormant in her heart, is oppressing her. At last! *At last* her pride has given way, and she would now sue to him, who up to this has kneeled to her in vain. She would say to him—she knows not what! Oh, for words to express all that she is feeling!

Her hands are clasped convulsively together. Her lips, pale and frozen, refuse to obey her will. And yet it is the last time! He himself has said so. After to-day he will be dead to her, and she to him. If she lets him go now, she consents to a parting that will last for ever. *For ever!* Oh, horrible words! And yet she *cannot* speak! Her love, her life is going, yet she can utter no word to detain him! What witchcraft has seized upon her? Already he has reached the turn where the myrtles meet; soon they will hide him. The last moment has indeed come! Will he not turn?

She throws out her arms as if suffocating; she moves

blindly forwards. By a mighty effort she overcomes the lethargy that is overpowering her, and cries aloud. Her voice is faint and exhausted, but sharp with agony, and clear. It reaches him.

"*Felix!*" she sobs desperately, breaking down in one passionate moment the barrier that has stood between them for so many miserable months. Her arms are still out-stretched.

He turns, caught by that plaintive cry.

"*My love!*" he whispers brokenly; and then in another moment she is lying on his breast, and all the world is forgotten.

* * * * *

"Speak to me, beloved!" he murmurs presently.

"What can I say to you?" she whispers back tremulously, her beautiful head resting happily upon his breast.

"The one thing I have longed all this weary time to hear—that you love me!"

"I do love you!" the answer comes freely, earnestly.

"You know it now; I have loved you a long time, I think: long before I knew it myself."

"And yet you would have married Clanbrassil?"

"There is something about that—something you must hear," she says, flushing.

And then comes out the old story of her father's difficulties; her terrible perplexity; the reproaches of one parent, the heart-broken sighs of the other; the immediate necessity for the money; the crushing of her pride, the mad determination to sell herself to help those she loved! It was a pitiful story, told with many sobs, and breathing of bitter grief and humiliation.

"My poor love!" murmurs Felix when she has finished.

"Yet there was an alternative. I could have helped you as well as he."

"Ah! but you I loved! I could not have asked you," returns she paling.

"Sometimes, do you know," whispers he tenderly, "I fancied you did love me, but the next moment would up-braid myself as a fool for so thinking. You were very

capricious—you were very cruel to me—my own sweet-heart!"

"And you—how good to *me*!"

She trembles in his arms, and of her own accord presses her lips to his cheek. There is remorse in this gentle action, and love that, long imprisoned, is now rejoicing in its freedom.

"Is this really you?" exclaims he, gazing into her eyes as though he will never be satisfied with a full knowledge of her beauty. And you are my own—my very own! Ten minutes ago I was the most miserable man on earth. *Now!* with whom would I exchange?" Here a passing thought, a recollection seizes hold of him. He draws his breath sharply, and tightens his arm around her. "Shall I ever forget the day I first heard of your engagement to Clanbrassil?" he says in a low tone.

"That is all over! Forget that!" entreats she nervously.

"In time I shall. And, after all, what does it—what does anything matter? Surely, this moment makes up for all!"

"I myself will make amends. I will teach you to forget," whispers she sweetly. "Ah, Felix! I have grieved you—but surely now our sad days are at an end!"

"Are they? As yet I can hardly realize all that has happened. It is difficult to spring at once from sorrow into joy like this. Have you indeed given yourself to me, my own darling? Is it all quite true? Imogen! there is something you have not yet said to me. You have told me you love me. That, indeed, is sweet—but still there is something else."

"Yes?"

She has grown pale again, and her lips are quivering.

"There was a reason why you rejected me before. That reason still remains."

"Felix, is this kind?" breathes she in a low, agitated tone.

"Better look at things steadily. Now—once for all," returns he with determination, "my birth, my origin, caused all our pain. It made me distasteful in your sight.

You remembered perpetually that my money was made by cotton. I was a commercial man—or, at least, my father was; I rubbed clothes with trade; I suggested Manchester! The birth, the touch of trade still remain. I am rich, but my forefathers traded in cotton. Let us disguise nothing. I have no long ancestry. My grandfather, as I remember him, was a distinctly vulgar old man, at whom you might be excused for shuddering——”

“Felix!” There is agony in her tone.

“Nay, hear me out. I confess to my shame, I often shuddered at him myself. My father is a very plain old man, though”—lifting his head with a sort of proud affection—“as great a gentleman at heart as any lord in Europe! I have seen you look coldly upon *him*.” He stops short, and presses his teeth upon his under-lip till he almost draws the blood. “I saw that,” he continues presently; “and *still* I loved you, as I never have and never shall love another creature upon earth.”

“Oh, how you make me hate myself!” moans she piteously.

“I am kind, my beloved, nevertheless. It is a risk we are both running: let me be sure it will not end disastrously. Bring your mind to bear on all I say. Think well. My father will be yours. I could not endure, even from you, a shadow of disrespect cast upon him. My wife must reverence my father. Now you know all.” He has grown deadly pale. He has released her, and is standing back from her, his eyes fixed upon her face. “Will you, after all this, be my wife?” he asks slowly. “Will you marry me?”

“You, or nobody!” cries she vehemently, holding out her hands to him. “What do I care for birth? I care only for you! There is no one, it seems to me, but you in all the world. Felix, forgive me!—come to me—although I am most unworthy.”

“My darling, I was cruel. But it was for your own sake, lest in the future——”

“No, no! You could not say words hard enough. You accuse me of pride. It is true. Pride—false pride—was in my heart: but I have seen through it now—I have

conquered myself. I have fought a long battle, and I have been worsted in the fight, and I am *glad* of it—*glad—GLAD!*” Her eyes run over suddenly with passionate tears, and she sobs aloud upon his breast.

“Hush, hush! my own!”

“It does me good!” whispers she, clinging to him. “All these weeks of your illness I have wanted to cry, but could not. There were hours when I believed you would die, knowing nothing of my love, and even then tears refused to come. I used to sit for hours dry-eyed and motionless, wondering why *I* should have been the one selected to endure such mental torture.”

“Yet all that time you never came to see me,” says Felix, a little loving reproach in his tone.

Upon this, a sudden crimson flush dyes her face. She lifts her soft drenched eyes to his for a swift moment, then hides again upon his breast.

“I used to lie in my bed picturing you to myself as happy and contented with Clanbrassil. If I had only known then that all was at an end between you and him, what a relief it would have been! What a solace to know, that even though you never might belong to me, you yet belonged to no other man. Jealously consumed me then. It grew with my weakness until it became a veritable giant—a very king of torments. Waking or sleeping, or in delirium, it shook me. ‘More cruel than the grave,’ it was. Beloved! had you only come to me, even *once*, how you might have assuaged my grief!”

A little nervous tremor runs through her. Withdrawing herself from his embrace, she steps back from him, and resolutely lifts her eyes to his. There is anguish in them.

“*I did* come!” she declares in a low broken voice.

“Afterwards—yes; but then, when lying on my bed——”

“Yes, then! Not afterwards, but then! I lied to you when I denied it. I—I——”

“It was no vision then—it was true—*true?*” interrupts he, laying his hand on her arm. “I did not dream it! You came——”

“Yes—yes.” She draws her breath with difficulty,

but her beautiful shamed eyes seem to cling to his; they refuse to lower themselves. "They sent for me. I went. It was all, all true. I knelt beside you, I—I kissed you! Ah! no! no! Do not look at me, Felix! It was horrible. I had not even confessed to my love for you. It was——"

"The most merciful action of your life," interposes he gravely. "I believe it saved mine—at least my reason. In some strange way it strengthened me. But why did you not come sooner?"

"I could not. I dared not. That day on the hunting field, when you fell—when you lay insensible—your head upon my knees—when I thought you *dead*"—she shivers as if with cruel cold—"something happened then, I hardly know what; but something I did, something I said, betrayed the truth to papa and Lord Clanbrassil. I was half mad, I think; I spoke to you—lying so cold and white within my arms—as one could only speak to the man one loves; as I could speak alone to *you*!"

Felix, lifting one of her slender hands, presses upon the palm a soft lingering caress.

"Then Clanbrassil knew. That evening he gave me my freedom. But it seemed a poor gift, with you lying senseless in that room upstairs. Oh! how my heart flew to you! How I longed to be beside you! But the knowledge that I had betrayed myself to my father—the slowly awakening remembrance of the wild things I had said to you—I, the affianced wife of another man!—weighed me down with shame. I hardly dared inquire for you; I sat apart in my own room hour after hour, and grew almost distracted because I dared not ask to see you! Ah! shall I ever cease to remember those endless hours?"

"Happier hours will kill them; and to talk of them will do you good. Tell me all, sweetheart."

"Day by day I sat eating my heart away. There seemed no comfort anywhere. The accounts from the sick room were so bald, so meagre, to one hungry as I was for every detail. I envied Patricia so keenly (who could see you when she would) that I grew almost to hate her! Strange! no one seemed to think *I* would care to sit by you. I had acted my part too well, and my father kept his own

counsel. Then came a day! Oh! the joy of that one solitary day! Some one knocked at my door. 'Would I go to you for a moment?' *Would I?* My heart seemed to live again as the words fell on my ear. They said I should go to you, whether I would or no. Had they only known! But you see that one day destroyed all the others that might have been. When I did get to you, I was so overjoyed that I forgot everything. And afterwards I was ashamed of myself."

"My darling, you forget that I *asked* you to kiss me. It was only an act of humanity on your part. Anyone would have so far humoured a miserable wretch such as I was then."

"It was not the humanity *you* speak of," interrupts she quickly, with some excitement. "Do not mistake me. I tell you," cries she, lifting to his her pale sad face, and speaking with a positive abandonment, "that if you had *never* asked me—if you had been lying there altogether senseless, speechless, helpless—I should have kissed *you* all the same!"

She bursts into tears.

"I was *longing* to kiss you!" she sobs with the deepest self-abasement.

"If you could only know how I love you for so longing!" murmurs he, straining her to his heart with passionate fondness.

* * * * *

"And now," exclaims he, half an hour later, "all our accusations, our reproaches, our dismal recollections must be put to flight for ever. Let us forget everything except that we are together, and will be so for ever; and that *you* have me, and *I* have you."

She laughs a little, though tremulously still.

"Considering all things, I wonder you don't hate me," she says. "Do you remember that day in the wood, when I sprained my foot? Did you hate me then?"

"No," returns he absently, being busy thinking for the thousandth time of her beauty that is ever growing in his eyes.

His ineloquent answer renders her dissatisfied.

"How strangely you say that," she exclaims, glancing at him. "Was there—tell me the truth, Felix—I shan't be *very* angry—was there ever a time when you detested me?"

"Darling! what a question! *Never!* How could you imagine such a thing?"

"Easily. My only wonder is, that you did not learn to dislike me cordially; that you did not leave me altogether, and go away and forget me. Ah! what should I have done then? Surely," looking anxiously at him, "there must have been some moments when you thought me both cold and heartless."

"I never thought you anything but the very sweetest thing in all this world—this *blissful* world!" returns he with ecstatic earnestness. "Beloved! this is the truth I tell you. Believe it."

"I do, gladly," whispers she, lifting her soft shining eyes to his, full of a perfect trust.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

"Sweet are the thoughts that savour of content—
The quiet mind is richer than a crown."

"Marriage is the best state for man in general."

THE excitement in the Heriot household is considerable during the evening. It increases rather than diminishes as the hours go on. The great news seemed to spread from post to pillar almost immediately; although neither Imogen nor Felix could ever afterwards remember having been the herald of it. Certainly, Imogen confessed later on to having met Patricia on the staircase, on her return to the house after the momentous interview with Felix, and to having thrown her arms round her neck, and embraced her in a manner so impassioned, that poor Patricia declared she was frightened out of her senses, and that her wits quite deserted her!

Thereupon Sandie, who happened to be present, gave it as his opinion that such a desertion should not be regarded as a misfortune, but rather as a merciful deliverance, and a fit subject for public rejoicing. If Imogen's engagement did really cause such a mental disturbance to take place, Patricia, he considered, owed her a lifelong gratitude, as undoubtedly the phenomenon would prove an everlasting good.

"Tush!" said Patricia disdainfully, pouting her pretty lips. "Methinks you prate too much, Sir Ape!"

Lady Olivia, too, had a little story to tell of how she went to the garden to seek an invalid, and found instead a young man all aglow with health and spirits, who, as if in the very abandonment of joy, was vigorously raking the gravelled paths, as though hoping to expect double wages for his work. With this young man she had remonstrated,

mildly but firmly, on the madness of exertion, when ease and quiet were required; but her words had been treated with scorn.

"Not a word!" cried that young man with the gayest laugh in the world. "Ill? who calls me ill? I am well, I tell you. I never was so well in all my life. Come now, Lady Olivia, I will whisper to you one thing: I shall dance at my own wedding yet."

That was reasonable enough, she told him, but in the meantime, if he would desist from his work it would be well. And really she was not in want of an under-gardener just at present, and if——

There had been an embrace on this occasion too; the young man with the rake had thrown that useful article with quite a jocund air right into the middle of a bed glowing with narcissi, and had taken Lady Olivia herself round the neck and had kissed her fondly.

"After *that*," said Lady Olivia (who certainly did not seem in the least embarrassed or annoyed at the circumstance), "of course I knew everything!"

Altogether, the news creates quite a sensation. Everybody is astonished, and pleased, and delighted in turn; especially old Mr. Bohun, who, dropping in just before dinner, is so electrified by what he hears, that he actually consents to stay to dinner and drink the healths of the newly affianced pair in his morning clothes.

Mrs. Brown and Lady Olivia have first a good cry together, and then a cup of tea in the privacy of the latter's own sanctum, after which they arrange the entire wedding—trousseau, presents, wedding tour, *all!*—before there is time to breathe! Patricia's affair sinks into insignificance: all thoughts are concentrated on the latter, the more unlooked-for event.

Sylvia Yelverton, too, shows herself enchanted when she hears of it, but mitigates the warmth of her congratulations, and relieves her overcharged feelings by instantly designating them both a "pair of muffs."

"Tut! Did they indeed imagine her so devoid of brains that she could not see how it was between them from the very beginning?"

"What a poor speech!" says Sandie, who seems to be always on the spot. "Couldn't you think of something new? The 'I told you how 'twould be' sort of business is so extremely ancient. Did you ever know anybody who couldn't have told?"

"In spite of your world-renowned fame for thought-reading," says Miss Yelverton, "I am not afraid of you. And what I want to learn is did *you* know? Not a bit of it!—you were as dense as a fog; so no more airs, Mr. Sandie, 'an' you love me."

"I don't," returns Sandie promptly.

"Sour grapes!" says Miss Yelverton; "you never received such a blow in your life as when you heard I—it—I was promised to Tom. Come, confess now."

"It is true! No wonder you stammer, when you think of the base way in which you led my young affections astray, and then betrayed them," says Sandie. Whereupon they both laugh.

Indeed, laughter just now is the order of the day.

"I don't believe either of you knew anything about us," says Felix.

"I did!" persists Sylvia, undaunted.

"Then your foreknowledge must have received a severe shock when Clanbrassil was on the *tapis*."

"Ah! there you are in fault! I knew perfectly she would never care for that nice Clanbrassil, just because he was the very sort of person anyone else would have loved devotedly, and was so far superior to yourself!" Here she wisely retreats behind a chair. "He was too good for her, and that's the fact!" she goes on with reckless hardihood. "She was unable to appreciate him. Now, *now*, Felix! not a word! don't abuse me, it is not gentlemanly; remember, if you please, that you are a *man*, and must not beat a woman, however aggravating, unless it be absolutely necessary."

"The absolutely necessary moment has arrived!" declares Felix, making a dart towards her.

Miss Yelverton flies. A friendly table comes to her aid. Behind it she ensconces herself, whilst calling piteously upon Sandie to come to her assistance.

But Sandie, in viewing her from afar with folded arms and knitted brows, declines to succour her.

"A moment since you sneered at me," he says malevolently. "Now you suffer for it. Where is Tom? Where is your legitimate protector, the chosen of your heart? Why does not he avenge you, and drag you from the arms of the assailer?"

"You are a fiend," declares Miss Yelverton breathlessly, who is plainly enjoying herself immensely. "You are," with a glance at Felix, "*fiends*. But I defy you all. Ah!" with a cry of joy, "here is Tom! Tom, save me! And now, Master Felix, let me tell you this," cries she, from the sure shelter of her lover's arms, "that I *did* know! that I saw through everything! that I read you both straight off! that I thought you both a pair of fools! And—ah! you despise my gift, but will you kindly remember how I prognosticated evil on that last day when we went a-hunting?"

"Yes; I remember," says Felix thoughtfully.

"It was a presentiment," declares Sylvia merrily. "I am a witch, I tell you! Aren't you afraid of me, Tom?"

She glances back over her shoulder at her lover in a truly bewitching fashion.

"One thing, Sylvia!" exclaims Imogen, creeping up to her with a pale face. (Oh! silly, stately Imogen!) "You must have no more presentiments about Felix! I hate them. They—they are so uncomfortable!"

"Must I not?" cries Sylvia gaily. "Is he quite your own property now? Very good; after to-day you shall have all the dismal forebodings to yourself. I shan't interfere; I shall be too busy casting shadows for Tom! But just for this last time, let me tell you that I have a sure and certain idea that——"

"No, no!" entreats Imogen, growing pale. "Not another word. Indeed, I do not *want* to know! I beg you, dear Sylvia, to cease from your imaginings."

"As you will! But see now," laughs Sylvia mischievously, "how I am understood. One would think it was my fault that Felix broke a rib or two, and gained the very woman whom of all the world he desired. Ah! Tom, what

cruel times we live in! And after all I was only going to say that I had an idea that Imogen's wedding would be bright with sunshine."

"I did not think it was only that. I fancied——" begins Imogen.

"Now that you have slighted my sooth-saying I am sure it will *hail!*" declares Miss Yelverton teasingly.

"And who cares if it does?" exclaims Patricia, who has entered the room at this moment, Bohun at her heels.

"For my part, I like hail; it is very invigorating; if it comes strong enough, how it makes one tingle! Sylvia, let my Imogen alone. I'm as good a witch as ever you were, and I tell you the heavens will rain only sunshine on her head."

"Well! Hail, rain, or sunshine," retorts Sylvia, "I expect we shall all be married *some day!*"

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

'What is it to be a gentleman? It is to be honest, to be gentle, to be generous, to be brave, to be wise, and, possessing all these qualities, to exercise them in the most graceful outward manner.'

VERY few thoughts are given to Clanbrassil in these days of love-making. All his devotion, gentleness and true nobility of heart are forgotten, or counted as of small value beside the living ever-present love.

Nevertheless, when a little later there comes a letter from him to Imogen, telling her of how he has learned in his far resting-place of her engagement to Felix, and wishing her every joy and happiness with an ungrudging heart, a repentant chord is struck within her breast, and for that one day at least she goes about silent and downcast, and *almost* sad.

"What is it?" asks Felix, who is swift to read any changes in the face he loves. He has noticed her depression long before this, but has refrained from speech. When, however, "Yes" and "No" have been his portion for a long half-hour, he comes to the point.

"Nothing!" returns she, with a heavy sigh that means "Everything."

"Has anything vexed you?" anxiously.

"No. Oh, no!" dismally.

"You are certainly tormenting yourself about something."

"I—it is nothing, *really*."

"Darling, why won't you confide in me? Do you think I can't see that you are wretched? Tell me about it. I may be able to help you."

"You least of all, I am afraid."

"Then there *is* something? Go on. You will feel ever so much better when you have spoken of it. Is it bad news of any sort?"

"To read it," says Miss Heriot tearfully, taking a letter from her bosom, "one would say it was good news, but to me, who understand him, it is full of misery."

"He? Who?" somewhat abruptly. A letter! from a *him!* and lying in her bosom!

"Ah! He cannot deceive *me!*" goes on Miss Heriot mournfully. She is looking wonderfully sad, and tears are standing thick within her beautiful eyes.

"*Who* can't? Why don't you speak?" exclaims her lover, with ill-suppressed agitation.

"Lord Clanbrassil! See, I had this"—pointing to the letter—"from him this morning. It is the kindest, the most forbearing of letters, but I can see by it that I have broken his heart."

"He isn't the only man in the world who has had to learn a sharp lesson from a woman."

"Don't be hard, Felix! What you say does not make me feel in the very least less guilty. Read his letter and judge for yourself if I have not a right to grieve." She tenders the obnoxious epistle to him.

"No, thank you," returns he, drawing back from it as though it were a toad or some other noisome reptile. "I can quite understand without that. But, surely, if you wronged him, you have fretted enough about it already. I," glancing at her, "suffered too."

"Ah, yes! But now you are happy!"—she examines him carefully—"you *are* happy?"

"You know that," gravely.

"And he isn't. That is what weighs upon me. I wish all the world could be without care! And to know that it is my fault is unendurable." She sighs heavily.

"It was all very unfortunate, certainly," says Felix in his most matter-of-fact tone, and rather unsympathetically. "But what is done, *is* done, and over. Either he or I was bound to go to the wall, and I can't feel sorry that it wasn't I. You must look at it in this light; if you had married him, two people would have been made wretched

instead of one, and that of course would have been worse."

"I suppose so," murmurs she in a low tone. She is thinking deeply, but to him her manner conveys a doubt "I am afraid I shall never cease to regret," she says, her hands clasped, her eyes fixed upon the ground.

"They are sitting in the garden under a huge horse-chestnut that is just bursting into bloom, and the slanting rays from the far sun are lying across the sward beneath their feet.

Felix poles.

"It is too soon and too late to feel *that!*" he says coldly. "You should have thought of it two months ago." Then he fixes his eyes upon her face. "What is your regret?" he asks fiercely.

"Clanbrassil," returns she simply, thinking of her sorry treatment of that worthy young man.

This answer fires Felix.

"Why, if that is all, there is still hope for you," he says, taking such pains to suppress his despair and passion, that she, with her eyes ever fixed upon the grass, rests ignorant of the storm she has so unwittingly raised. "He cannot be so far off that you may not recall him. You have his address," making a faint gesture towards the luckless letter that still lies upon her knee. "Write to him."

"To tell him to come here?" There is a distinct gleam of hope in her voice that goes to his soul and renders him dumb with pain and anger. "Yes, that is a good thought," she goes on feverishly. "When he was here before I said so little. I did not explain. And he did not understand how I felt then; I hardly understood myself——"

"I hope you thoroughly understand *now*," interrupts he in a tone impossible to describe. "Let there be no more mistakes! Explain to him fully how you have successfully broken not only his heart—but mine!"

"Felix!" She has turned large startled eyes upon him.

"It is all quite in keeping," he goes on bitterly, but calmly. "Now him—now me—now him again! A mental see-saw. It is very just too, and doubtless Sylvia was right when she said he was worthier of you than I could

ever be. But I would you had known your own mind, before sending me into a fool's paradise ! ”

She has risen to her feet.

“ You do not know what you are saying,” she says with pale lips. “ You are mad, so to speak to me. Go. Leave me ! ”

“ For ever ? ”

“ As you will.”

“ You send me from you, then ? ”

There is a determination about his face that frightens her. She covers her eyes with one hand.

“ Ah ! *He* would not so have spoken,” she cries faintly, unable—womanlike—even at the very crisis, to resist giving him this stab.

“ He ! Is it always to be *he* ? ” cries Felix in a voice of anguish.

“ I have told you to leave me. I must think ! I must be alone ! ” returns she impatiently.

But even as he obeys her, as she hears his footsteps grinding upon the gravelled walk, her heart dies within her, and she would gladly, but for the pride that is consuming her, have recalled him. It is a remnant of the old pride—perhaps the last faint touch of it, so far as he is concerned.

Five, ten, fifteen minutes go by, and still she stands there alone upon the sward, her hands clasped, her heart beating. He *will* return ! And soon too. He will acknowledge he wronged her, and will sue for a forgiveness that is already his. How long it seems ! Surely hours, not minutes, have gone by since last he spoke to her !

What a silly misunderstanding it had been altogether ! *She* had meant one thing—*he*, another ; but mischief had arisen out of it. Jealous ! and of Clanbrassil, too, at this time of day ! Of the man who for his sake she had betrayed and slighted. It was foolish—it was unkind of him ! Tears are in her eyes and in her throat. Involuntarily she puts up one white trembling hand to the latter. Her attitude is a little strained. Evidently she is listening intently for a coming footfall. He must, he will come back to her !

Ah! what is that? A slight sound falls upon her ear. She smiles secretly, and a quick flush rises to her cheeks.

Nearer comes the sound, ever nearer. It is *he*!

She smiles again as this certainty comes home to her; and then as in duty bound, brings back her face into the lines of gravity. He must be scolded just a *little* bit before that foregone forgiveness is accorded him. She presses her hand upon her beating heart, and turns to find herself face to face with—Lord Clanbrassil!

There is a long, a terrible pause. All the blood seems to have died in Imogen's body—only a chill remains.

Clanbrassil is the first to recover himself.

"I had to come back," he says gently. "I could not help it. The feeling grew upon me, until it was too strong to be resisted, that I must see you again as Imogen Heriot! It was selfish of me, perhaps—I distress you—but——"

"I am very glad to see you," returns Imogen at last, moved out of her lethargic surprise by the sight of his emotion, that amounts almost to distress. She had not given him any greeting on first seeing him; but now she moves slowly forward, and holds out her hand. "It is a—a surprise, of course," she goes on in rather a stunned way. "Because we thought—we imagined—you were in Venice. And——" she breaks off here, and looks confused. "There was that letter this morning" she says desperately.

Will anything make amends for the coldness of her reception?

"I know. It was posted early in the day: and afterwards the longing to see you once again so grew upon me, that I packed up and started—*with it*!"

He is speaking quite quietly. There is no suspicion of passion or agitation, there is even a certain monotony in his tone; but every word hurts her as though it were a knife.

"I am glad of anything that brought you," returns she courteously; and then she could have killed herself for the cruel coldness of her little studied speech. Yet what can she say?

"There was another reason for my coming," continues he

as though he has not heard her words. "I am off to Egypt next week; and it occurred to me that there was, perhaps, just a little chance that I might not see you again."

A sharp exclamation breaks from her—low, but distinct. "Oh! as for that," says he laughing—*such* a laugh; "it was an absurd thought, you know, and hardly worthy of record; but I wish to explain to you why it is I again troubled you. I would not have come unless there was a *reason*! I dare say in my desire to see you I exaggerated the fancy I so foolishly mentioned? Don't think of that again."

Imogen lifts a haggard face to his; she creeps closer to him, and lays her hand upon his arm.

"Just now—it seems but a minute ago," she whispers, "I was wishing I could see you—I was *longing*," speaking with increasing eagerness, "to see you, with as great a desire as you had to see me! I wanted to tell you, what I did not tell you then—on that last evening when we met—what I thought of you, and how I admired, and honoured, and—and *loved* you!"

She draws her breath quickly, and his hand, closing upon hers, presses it reassuringly.

"You must not say to me things like that," he says simply. "There is nothing to admire, to honour! I would have kept you if I could; but," with a sigh, "that was not to be. You—" he hesitates. "You are happy?"

"Yes." As though ashamed at such a moment to confess so much, she hangs her head.

"That is well," continues he bravely. That is what I wish to hear. God keep you happy! That will be my prayer for you ever. It is my last prayer now. Remember it, and gratify me by striving for its fulfilment. See here," he flings upon the garden-seat a packet he has been holding all along, and that he had evidently forgotten up to this moment. "There are a few baubles you may like to wear upon your wedding-day. And now a last word. Do not be unhappy when you think of me: feel no regret. There was something you said just now—that you *loved me*," here for the first time he grows agitated. "That has repaid me for all!"

Imogen breaks into tears.

At this instant a figure comes slowly round the corner, and Felix, pale and stern, approaches them. There is something however, in the dignified despair of Clanbrassil's expression that for once and for ever convinces him of the truth.

The two men, as they look into each other's eyes, pause involuntarily. Then Clanbrassil slowly inclines his head, and Felix returns the salute in kind.

Imogen, standing almost between them, is sobbing bitterly. Felix would have gone to her, but a gentle instinct, that warns him to take no notice of her before his less fortunate rival, holds him back.

"She is yours, sir. Be good to her—cherish her!" says Clanbrassil in a low tone, looking straight at Felix. "You have gained a treasure that, to me, seems priceless."

Felix bows again.

"I came to-day to see her for the last time before her marriage—perhaps for the last—— Thank you for accepting my charge to you in so kindly a spirit; but she is very dear to me, as you know, and I would risk much for her. I count her as not altogether a lost possession, as the memory of her will live with me as long as *I* live. I will not detain you longer." He stops speaking for a moment, and then all at once turns his eyes again on Felix with an excessively sweet smile. "I feel," he says, with a rare generosity, "that I am leaving her in safe hands. Farewell, sir!"

Once more he inclines his head, and then turns to Imogen. She is still crying, softly, but passionately. One hand is hanging passive by her side; lifting it, he presses it reverently to his lips, and without another word or glance leaves them, and disappears through the shrubberies.

For a little while there is silence; then Felix, going nearer to Imogen, folds his arms round her.

"Poor, poor fellow!" he whispers softly. "I was wrong to quarrel with you about him. That is the *very* last thing he would desire."

"The very last indeed!"

"I was unjust—ungenerous. Oh, how he puts me to shame! In truth, my beloved, he would have been your wiser choice."

"Oh, hush! We were both wrong—we were both in fault."

"I never met so gentle a spirit. I pray heaven no harm may come to him." Presently he stoops and presses his lips to the soft hair that lies upon her forehead. I grieved you, Imogen; I hurt you—you whom I love best; but it was madness made me doubt you even for a moment. You will forgive me?"

"Dear, dear Felix!" breathes she softly, drawing his face down until it rests against her own.

* * * * *

It is their first, their last misunderstanding. And here, where Clanbrassil left them—*for ever*—and where the influence of his gentle grief still lingers, they build up their tiny breach with many loving words and tender vows.

It is the springtime of their love and youth. A gracious time! a season full of richest promise, and warm with happy expectation. Care, disheartened, has flown from them. Hope reigns triumphant! With hearts and souls wrapped up in each other, what hour is left them in which to dwell upon the griefs of others? Soon, that scene in the garden is left behind them and forgotten.

* * * * *

Clanbrassil they never saw again. A month later sad news came to them that checked for a time their joy. He was dead! He had been killed in a skirmish with a party of Arabs, and not even his bones were ever brought back to his native land.

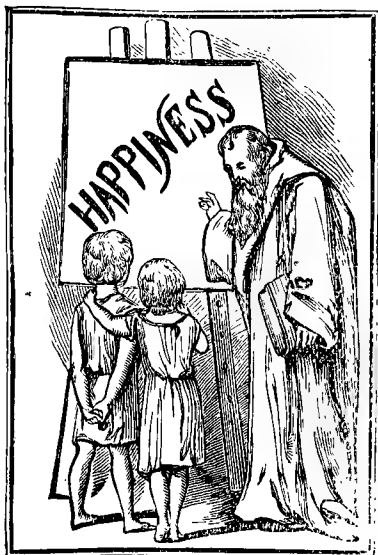
A true gentleman, brave and tender in heart, he quitted this world where grief was his portion, to gain that rest for which his tired soul yearned. Surely his reception in the mystic land that lies beyond our death-sleep was a loving one; for

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